

Welcome to Waterdeep

The environs of the Realms' City of Splendors

by Ed Greenwood

The following is an introduction to the city of Waterdeep, often mentioned in many of Ed Greenwood's tales from the Forgotten Realms published in DRAGON® Magazine. Though this was originally written for FR1 Waterdeep and the North, the first of the FORGOTTEN REALMS™ sourcebooks, there was no room for it – so we were able to steal this piece away for publication here. It will not be seen in the final version of Waterdeep and the North, but it is compatible with the material in that work. With that, we welcome you to Waterdeep.

Waterdeep is the gateway to the North. It dominates the lesser cities of Silvery moon, Mirabar, Luskan, Neverwinter, and Sundabar (listed here in order of relative size and influence). The North is a frontier land of rugged mountains, seemingly endless forests, many ruins and dungeons (subterranean cities left behind by the dwarves), and mineral wealth now being taken by humans as the dwarves retreat, as detailed in the first chapter of *Waterdeep and the North*. This article deals with the immediate vicinity of Waterdeep, as shown on the Environs of Waterdeep map. Numbered map features are detailed below. The area to the immediate east and south of the City of Splendors is mostly open, rolling grassland, long since logged bare. This land is currently used by many herdsman for grazing camps near their markets in Waterdeep.

1. Ardeep Forest

Until recently, this ancient forest, a remnant of the woods that once covered the North from the river Delimbiyr to the mountains of the Utter North, was the home of the Moon Elves. This ancient race of elvenkind once lived in harmony with men and dwarves in a kingdom that

stretched to the east of the forest, in what is now rolling moorlands known as "the Fallen Kingdom." The forest is now forlorn and largely empty. The elves have all gone overseas to Evermeet via many covert voyages aboard *The Morning Bird*, a ship owned by Mirt the Moneylender, a local merchant of Waterdeep.

The elves have left the forest of tall blueleaf, duskwood, and weirwood trees unattended (see DRAGON issue #125, "Woodlands of the Realms"). This region was known as "Faraway Forest" to the elves because, although it was near the western coast of Faerun, it was still "far away" from what the elves considered home: the island realm of Evermeet. It is here that exploring PCs may encounter the NPCs Quth and Vedellen Hawkhand (detailed in chapter 7 of *Waterdeep and the North*), as well as some fearsome forest creatures that the elves once lived in harmony with.

After deleting encounters with evil creatures, lycanthropes, and bandits, the "cold, civilized forest" encounter table on page 141 in *Monster Manual II* may be used. Most evil elves have left the area entirely or have gone into the City (see Elaith Craulnobur and Zabbas Thuul in chapter 7 of *Waterdeep and the North*). Few were welcomed onto the ship to Evermeet. DMs should check for encounters only once every two turns.

Somewhere deep in this forest is the overgrown tomb of Reluraun, a warrior-hero of the elves, who is said to lie in his vault clad in magical elfin chain mail, with a *sword +2, dragon slayer* upon his breast. According to legend, the tomb is not unattended; magical creatures guard Reluraun's remains. "Ardeep" was the name of the western region of the ancient Fallen Kingdom, and now gives this forest its name.

2. Goldenfields

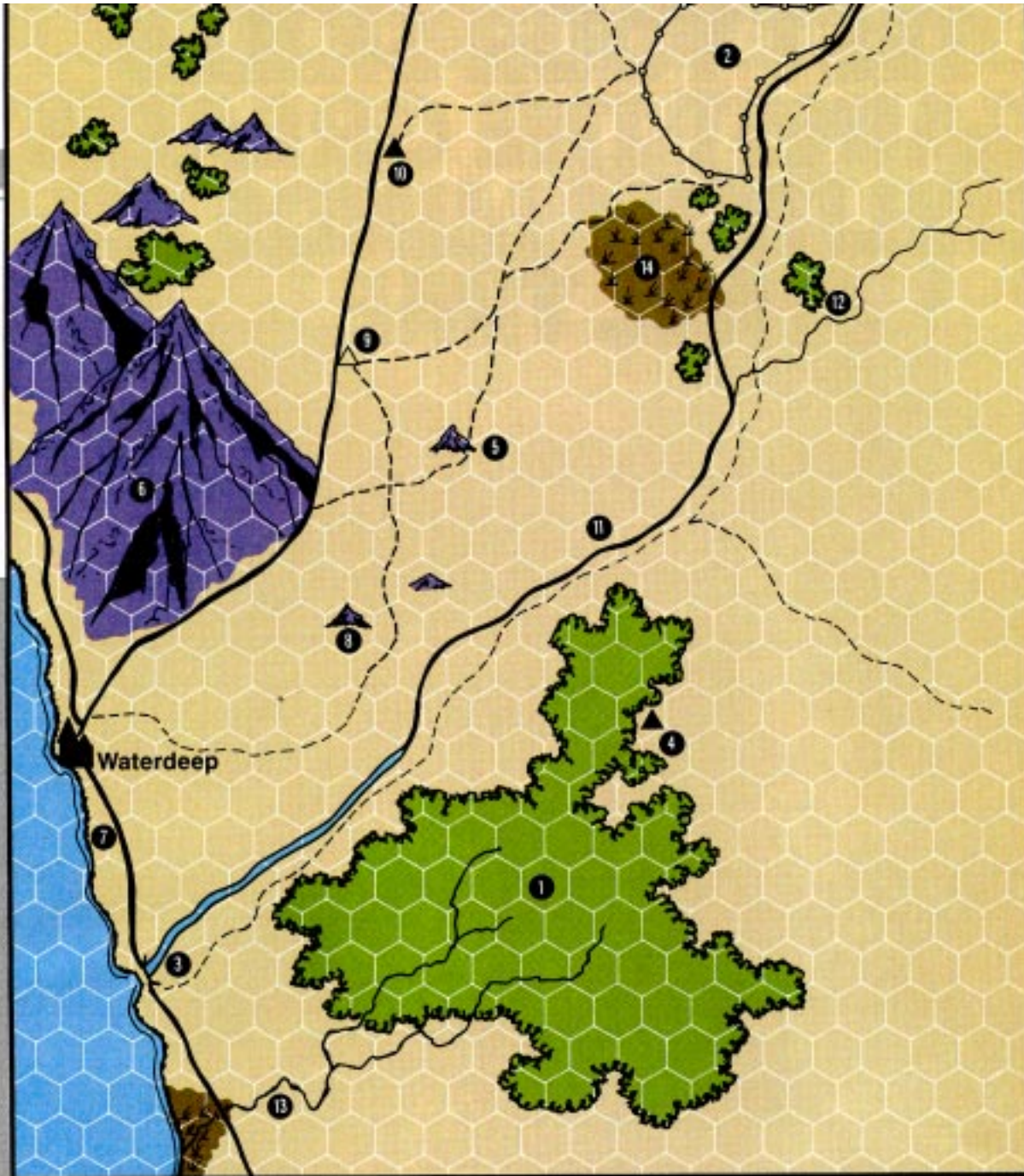
Begun only a handful of years ago by the cleric Tolgar Anuvien of Waterdeep, the fortified abbey of Chauntea has grown

from a small keep with a farm to a walled farm complex 20 miles on a side. Over 5,000 inhabitants, all of whom are devout worshipers of Chauntea, tend crops of edible vegetables. Patrols of adventurer-priests scour the lands around Goldenfields as far north as the Stone Bridge and as far east as the High Forest. Traveling in mounted groups of 20 or more, these patrols seek trolls, goblinkind, and other evil to fight; they also track game for capture and domestication.

To protect their environs, these patrols challenge all whom they meet, but will not fight unless they meet evil creatures or are themselves attacked. These groups usually include four or five clerics of 3rd-5th levels, five or six men-at-arms (accoutred with chain mail and lances), and a remaining force of zero-level devotees (accoutred with leather armor and a variety of weapons). There is a 20% chance for each patrol to include a magic-user of 2nd to 5th level who is of neutral-good or lawful-neutral alignment.

Goldenfields is rapidly becoming the granary of the North, supplying food to Waterdeep and the other inland cities. With the increased importance of Goldenfields, the influence and stature of Tolgar Anuvien have also increased. He is quickly becoming equal in power to the rulers of Silverymoon and Neverwinter. Tolgar plans to expand Goldenfields north to control the strategic Ironford river crossing, then to use that control to safely expand to the east bank of the Dessarin. To do this, Tolgar needs adventurers who are willing to defend Goldenfields and push back the evil creatures that roam the area. These adventurers must be completely loyal to Chauntea (or Lathander) and Goldenfields. They will most likely have boring careers in the constant patrolling of the region, so PCs may not be interested in such service.

Goldenfields enjoys good relations with Waterdeep and all the cities of the North (except Hellgate Keep), and happily takes in adventurers weary of danger or on the



THE ENVIRONS OF WATERDEEP

Scale: 1 hex = 6 miles

15 Feature detailed in text

△ Village or hamlet

▲ Fortress or ruin

■ Wooded area

~ Creek

— River



Shoreline



Marsh



Road



Track



Bridge



Fortified wall

FEATURES

1. Ardeep Forest
2. Goldenfields
3. Zundbridge
4. The House of Stone
5. Sarcrag
6. Mount Sar and Mount Helimbrar
7. Rat Hills
8. Maiden's Tomb Tor
9. Rassalantar
10. Amphail
11. River Dessarin
12. Gaustar's Creek
13. The Selpir (creek)
14. The Stump Bog

run from justice elsewhere, as long as they are willing to work in the fields.

3. Zundbridge

Named for its creator, the wizard Zund, this squat, massive stone bridge spans the River Dessarin, carrying the main caravan road south from Waterdeep to the lands of the Inner Sea far to the east, and to Baldur's Gate and the kingdoms of the South. Zundbridge has held firmly for over 80 winters, even in the roaring spring floods of the Dessarin, and has not been in need of repairs. Waterdeep patrols the road as far as Zundbridge and maintains a guard post there to stop adventurers who come in search of a stone golem said to have been used by Zund in the construction of the bridge. According to legend, the golem was left at the bridge upon Zund's death, and may be taken by any who can divine or stumble upon the secrets of commanding it.

Over the years, many such seekers have dug around the bridge on both banks, swum beneath it, and even tried to pry stones out of the bridge arches. Waterdeep's Guard fears that if the bridge was left unguarded, it would soon be demolished by these zealous, would-be golem owners. The post is equipped with a flight of three griffon steeds to give Waterdeep advance warning of the approach of any important visiting delegation or an attacking force.

4. The House of Stone

To the east of Ardeep Forest is a huge, square tower built a thousand years ago by dwarves under the charge of Turgo Ironfist. The citadel was built to help defend the shared kingdom of the elves, dwarves, and humans against attacking tribes of orcs, hobgoblins, bugbears, and trolls. The dwarves excavated huge, many-levelled storage granaries out of the rock, and built above them a fortress cunningly crafted of fitted stones. The fortress came to be known as "The House of Stone" after the old children's rhyme of the same title:

An elf calls the deepest wood his own,
A human everywhere may roam,
But a dwarf just wants a house of stone.

For many years, the Moon Elves guarded the tower, letting no one near it. Since their departure, however, several groups of adventurers have set out to explore the structure. As far as Waterdhavians know, none of these groups have returned. In old tales, The House of Stone is said to have many hidden doors, sliding rooms, and chambers that rise or fall in shafts like buckets in a well. The House of Stone is also believed to have dangerous traps, designed to capture intruders, and numerous caches of treasures (rooms of gold coins and of gems mined by the dwarves from everywhere in the North). Most importantly, an armory of weapons for the defense of the kingdom is said to have

been collected here, including weapons of powerful magic crafted by the elves and by dwarven smiths of long ago.

The famous bard Mintiper Moonsilver was allowed to see The House of Stone some years ago at the permission of Eroan, Arch-Mage of the Moon Elves. He reported that its gates were open. "A hill giant had forced them apart some months before my visit," Eroan told the Lords of Waterdeep, "for its huge corpse hung just beyond, impaled on a massive stone claw that had sprung out into the space beyond the doors. The elves just smiled when I asked if the place was full of such traps, and said it was best to assume so from safely outside its walls." It seems unlikely that later visitors will bear Mintiper's report in mind. Even now, such Waterdhavian adventurers as Elaith Craulnobur (see chapter 7 of Waterdeep and the North) are said to be forming adventuring companies to explore this fabled fortress.

5. Sarcrag

This small, jutting crag of bare rock provides a perfect natural lookout. On a clear day, some 60 miles of territory can be viewed; on a clear night, campfires can be seen 90 miles off to the north or east. Sarcrag also serves Waterdeep as a warning beacon. From its heights, northern patrols can signal the approach of attackers (as happened some 22 winters ago during the "Bleak Winter" of the Year of the Shaking Serpent). Sarcrag is said to be haunted by the "Howler" a bansheelike creature who is never around when adventuring bands come seeking it, but always seems to attack the weak or unwary. Leucrotta are also a persistent problem in this area, and are the main reason Waterdeep and Goldenfields patrol the road north as far as the trail that heads east to Ironford.

According to popular legend, bandits are said to have buried a fabulous treasure here at the foot of Sarcrag. Long ago, an armed force escorting the person and regalia of King Jaszur of Tethyr was ambushed north of Waterdeep and destroyed by bandits. These bandits were surrounded by Waterdeep's armies and slaughtered the next morning. Jaszur's body was found stripped of its golden and jewelled crown, orb, scepter, and sword of state (a flame tongue blade). The soldiers of the Guard swear that no man could have escaped through their lines, for mages cast *detect magics* all night to prevent magical escapes or attacks, and found nothing. Likewise, warriors of Waterdeep searched from the air on the backs of griffons. Many hopefuls have continued the search for King Jaszur's treasure over the 80 intervening years, but none have found the lost riches.

6. Mount Sar and Mount Helimbrar

These mighty peaks rise north of Waterdeep, guarding it from the worst winds of the North. To the east runs the road to

Triboar and the northern interior. To the west runs the coastal road which, after passing the two great peaks, enters the vast and treacherous swamp known as the Mere of Dead Men. The road then passes near the ruins of Iniarv's Tower. Iniarv was a mighty Arch-Mage of the ancient North who became a demilich later in his life. Some say Iniarv still guards the ruins of his spell library, though others claim that the famed "Company of the Howling Wolf" destroyed him 42 winters ago. None who may have investigated have made public any report on the truth of this academic dispute, however.

Mount Sar and Mount Helimbrar are named for two great fomorian giants who lived in the mountains until they were slain by early Warlords of Waterdeep. These mountains are still said to harbor stone giants and more fearsome menaces, although travelers also report seeing sylphs on the high ledges and side peaks. Gulyaikin Dzurund, "The Mad Dwarf," also lived in a warren of caves somewhere high up in Mount Sar some 70 winters ago (and may yet live there, if travelers' tales are to be believed). Gulyaikin was said to possess rich treasures and was noted for his occasional fits of berserk glee. During these fits, Gulyaikin delighted in killing all sorts of passersby by rolling large rocks onto the roads below and by catapulting large boulders at fishing boats offshore.

The evil mage Marune, once the chief agent of the outlawed Shadow Thieves in Waterdeep (prior to his exile from the City), is believed to have inhabited a subterranean stronghold at the base of Mount Helimbrar. This fortress was (and still may be) safe from Waterdhavian patrols, local monsters, and curious travelers alike because of the six will-o'-the-wisps that guarded the cavern and climbing shaft that was its only entry. Marune has not been heard from in 15 years, although he may yet be scheming and developing fell magic for revenge upon the Lords of Waterdeep. Marune is a chaotic-evil, 17th-level magic-user (maybe higher) with both an intelligence and a dexterity of 18.

7. Rat Hills

This area was once a barren, windswept pebble beach. Waves crashed and rolled incessantly across the shoal, for the water was and still is very shallow at this point. For almost a mile out, the seabed is a mere 5' from the surface of the water. In days of old, large ships beached here for repairs, and lumber barges pulled up for loading. As Waterdeep became rich enough to suffer human raiding, its people began to see this easy landing place as a danger to their safety – and as a free alternative to Waterdeep's harbor. A rough shantytown came into being, and the Shadow Thieves moved quickly to control it. Waterdhavians saw the danger immediately and acted swiftly.

The men of the Guard were called out in force. They drove out the inhabitants of

"The Beach," slaughtering those who resist and setting fire to everything that would burn. The Guard camped on the spot for two days, waiting for the fires to die down and keeping the area clear with strong patrols. The burnt debris was then tossed into the water, and the City began to bring its garbage to The Beach in wagonloads (now done by the Dungsweepers' Guild) rather than burning it outside the City walls.

Today, the Rat Hills are almost four miles in length and up to a mile in width. These hills of piled, rotting garbage poison the water in the shallows and extend along the entire beach area, effectively barring any hostile landings. The Guard patrols the caravan road and oversees the daily garbage convoy of Dungsweepers' wagons, but otherwise leaves the Rat Hills alone.

As the name suggests, these tangled hills are infested with rats. Scrub trees and gnarled creepers are everywhere. The reek is indescribable and foils all attempts to track by scent. Fresh garbage is brought daily, causing the Rat Hills to grow by almost half an acre per year. The inhabitants of the Rat Hills have made it too dangerous for the Dungsweepers to carry garbage into the interior, so fresh garbage is now piled at the outer edge of the Hills. Several attacks have made the City strengthen the Guards presence whenever garbage is brought or whenever parties pass the Rat Hills by night.

If the PCs elect to explore the area, DMs may use Table 1 to determine possible encounters. To render these encounters, roll 1d8 and 1d12, adding the result. Monsters listed in Table 1 are from the *Monster Manual* and may have treasure as indicated therein.

The Rat Hills are frequented by lizard men from the coast farther south, who are considering establishing a fortified lair in concealment here, and by kobolds from Maiden's Tomb Tor. At the DM's option, strong patrols of these creatures may be encountered. The Rat Hills are also home to Hlaavin, a giant doppelganger (HD 9, 67 hp, with otherwise normal attacks and abilities of doppelgangers) who occasionally hunts with leucrotta who also dwell in the area.

Hlaavin is particularly dangerous to visitors because of the *wand of illusion* it gained from an unwary sorcerer. The doppelganger uses the *wand* to lure parties of victims into pit traps and snares it has set in the area. After scattering a group, Hlaavin slays adventurers singly and feeds on the victims. Hlaavin creates tantalizing glimpses of treasure when small groups venture near in daylight. By using the *wand*, Hlaavin may cause a rusty sword hilt to appear to be of gold set with gems, glowing as if magical; a skeleton may appear to be wearing a gold ring; half-buried chests or partially corroded trade bars are other favorite *illusions*. Most of these images are made to appear atop a thin mat of garbage that Hlaavin

has laid over a pit it has dug, placing rocks and spears nearby for throwing down at trapped creatures.

In twilight or dawn, when the light is poor, Hlaavin attempts more difficult *illusions*, and uses its vocal mimicry. A favorite *illusion* is the image of a running girl clutching a clinking sack, followed shortly by a lumbering warrior. The warrior snarls "Come back, you little swindler! Half that gold is mine!" The *illusion* then disappears deeper into the Hills.

DMs should bear in mind that Hlaavin uses its *ESP* to create an image of precisely what a particular PC finds most attractive. This *ESP* allows Hlaavin to provide second, third, and additional *illusions*, if necessary, to make a PC believe the lure to be real. Hlaavin's *wand* has 67 charges left. Hlaavin does have a very real chest of treasure in its possession, containing 166 gp, 36 sp, 6 cp, and a diamond necklace worth 6,000 gp. The chest is buried somewhere in the heart of the Hills.

Many plant monsters may be added to the list of encounters, if a DM desires; shambling mounds and all manner of marine horrors may lurk in the shallows. There are said to be deep pools and flooded beast-tunnels in the tainted waters. Lizard men have also been seen in the area, and giant gar sometimes drift into the shallows to await the unwary.

Even simple contact with the water has its perils. Immersion or excessive skin contact with the tainted water of the Rat Hills shallows and the pools within the garbage (where rainwater collects) offers a 20% chance of contracting disease and a 14% chance of contracting a parasitic infestation (refer to the *Dungeon Masters Guide* for details on both). Characters must make an exposure-check roll on percentile dice once for each such contact; for prolonged contact, characters must check once per turn for each turn of continuous contact. Ingesting any of the water carries a 32% chance of contracting disease and a 30% chance of contracting a parasitic infestation. Characters should make an exposure check per ingestion. Note that dilution with water or wine cuts the chances of these contractions in half and may lessen them further due to further dilution. Boiling tainted water reduces disease chances to 2% per contact, and parasitic infestation chances to 0%.

Contact with the garbage of the Rat Hills (and the many insects that swarm in the noisome air above it) carries its own peril: a 5% chance of contracting disease and a 9% chance of contracting a parasitic infestation. An exposure check should be made once for each day in which a being is in or enters the garbage of the Rat Hills. (Thus, a character could enter and leave the Hills a dozen times in a day, and still suffer only a single check). If the garbage is excessively disturbed, however, whether by digging, an extensive physical fight, or spell-casting involving an explosion, all creatures in the vicinity must make an

additional exposure check (one per disturbance). Chances are not cumulative. Eating the meat of any inhabitant creature of the Rat Hills carries a 60% chance of contracting disease and a 100% chance of contracting a parasitic infestation (reduce chances by half if the meat is cooked).

If PCs adventure in the Rat Hills repeatedly, DMs may wish to expand adventures to include creatures such as boggles or a gathering of Shadow Thieves who are planning to jump a convoy of Dungsweepers' garbage wagons. Great treasure could well be located in the Rat Hills, perhaps left deliberately for the use of slavers in the City. A beholder or powerful evil creature could well lair in the heart of the Hills to provide a challenge if PCs are of formidable strength.

8. Maiden's Tomb Tor

This bare, high-peaked landmark is so titled for an unknown barbarian princess who was buried at the foot of the peak some 400 winters ago by warriors of Waterdeep. This honor occurred after the princess's people had attacked the City of Splendors in the harshest time of winter and had been repelled. The princess and her bodyguard fought with such ferocity that they slew thrice their number of fully armored fighting-men of the City in their day-long, bloody retreat. The barbarians died fighting to the very last warrior, ending their valiant campaign at the foot of the Tor. In memory of their heroism, the princess and the last of her bodyguards were laid to rest in a cairn under the summit of the Tor.

Recently, more than 450 kobolds have taken up residence beneath the Tor (see the Rat Hills), under a chief by the name of Kuthil. DMs should determine the precise dispositions of the kobolds and any treasure they may possess as desired. Kobold patrols have not yet menaced the Lords to any extent; Waterdeep and Goldenfields are not aware of the precise location of the little monsters. The kobolds could well have their attention directed mainly beneath the earth, in hitherto unknown subterranean realms of which their caverns are part. There are several surface connections to their lair on the sides of the Tor itself.

9. Rassalantar

Rassalantar is the first settlement of any size on the Long Road north of the City of Splendors. This hamlet is named after its founder, the ancient fighter Rassalantar. He built a keep (which is now in ruins) just west of the present buildings. (DMs may well locate a simple starter adventure for low-level PCs in the keep, which is not detailed in the sourcebook.)

Today, Rassalantar is little more than half a dozen walled farms adjoined in this spot, with a horse-watering pond on the west side of the road and a good inn, *The Sleeping Dragon*, on the east. Beyond the pond and to the west rises the Keep

Woods, a narrow but dense strip of thickly grown, gnarled woodlands in which the ruined Keep stands between two of the farms. The innkeeper, "Spider" Samallah, is a close friend of Durnan (a lord of Waterdeep), and the village is under Waterdeep's protection. The Guard maintains a 60-man outpost here, patrolling the road as far as a cairn five miles north of Amphail (listed later) and as far south as the gates of the City.

These men-at-arms are all zero-level and are accoutred with chain mail and shields, lances, long swords, hammers, and daggers. They are commanded by two 3rd-level fighter *armars* (sergeants) and a 5th-level fighter *civilar* (captain). The personnel rotate each week. The three commanders are named Blaskos Ulraven, Timmer Longschal, and Gheldarm Tassor, respectively.

10. Amphail

This village boasts the following establishments: *The Laughing Bandit Inn*; a forge of excellent reputation, which is run by the tall, bearded human Akrosz Ulvinhand; a horse-breeding ranch belonging to the retired adventuress Elraghona Selember; and, a small temple to Waukeen. Perhaps the most successful business in Amphail is the horse-breeding ranch, which supplies remounts to travelers all along the Long Road through inns such as *The Sleeping Dragon* in Rassalantar (which buys dozens of horses each year from the ranch).

Named for one of Waterdeep's early War Lords, Amphail the Just (who is said to still ride the area in spirit form, frightening away trolls and hostile barbarian tribes), this village, like Rassalantar to the south, is patrolled by Waterdeep's Guard in all seasons but winter. Amphail is ruled by a Lord Warder, presently the 3rd-level fighter Briiathor Alougarr. The Lord Warder swears fealty to Piergeiron, one of the Lords of Waterdeep. In return, the City of Splendors provides military strength, a Warder's purse of 600 gp quarterly, and many orders for fresh mounts from Elraghona's ranch.

11. River Dessarin

The fast-moving, cold, and deep Dessarin flows down to the sea from this point. The river is navigable and is home to many shalass (silver, troutlike fish that grow to 2' length), which make a highly prized meal throughout the North. The river can be crossed "dry" in this vicinity only at Zundbridge, at Ironford, and at the Stone Bridge, far to the northeast. The River Dessarin can otherwise only be crossed by swimming; it cannot be forded.

12. Gaustar's Creek

This small, fast-flowing stream has cut a narrow but deep gorge along its route. Many tiny caves and tunnels have been scratched out of the soft rock of the gorge walls by various creatures. A "thirst" of

stirges have laired in one of these caves for many years. Attempts to find their home and to thus corner and destroy them have been unsuccessful. Other creatures may well make one of the many caves their home. This small creek is named for the dwarf Gaustar, who is said to have buried a large chest of precious gems somewhere along the banks of the creek. Gaustar perished at the hands of pursuing orcs shortly thereafter. His people had been forced from their delves in the depths of winter some 60 years ago and, being harried by orcs all the way south, were slaughtered one by one. Gaustar's treasure has never been found, or at least none have admitted gaining it.

13. The Selpir (creek)

This slow, quiet creek drains Ardeep Forest. Lizard men sometimes lurk in the mouth of this marshy source, but mermen also like to congregate in the area. Recent history is marked by several vicious battles between the two races, many taking place in the shallows.

In elder days, the Fallen Kingdom was a proud realm. Many grand heroes of both elven and dwarven descent were laid to rest in the heart of the woods (the now much-smaller woods are known as Ardeep Forest). Over the centuries, the waters of this tiny creek have run endlessly to the sea, breaching many such tombs. Overgrown and forgotten even by the demihumans, these tombs have yielded their riches to the relentless water. A patient searcher has a 22% chance (check once every 20 continuous turns) of finding some treasure in the streambed, such as an electrum piece, perhaps, or a gold key. A *dagger* + 1 may well turn up; rarely are larger objects found. The DM should select items to be found here rather than rolling

at random, and should decide if any monsters make the vicinity their home.

14. The Stump Bog

The vast, sprawling Bog is named for numerous rotting stumps which rise from the still, green waters like blackened teeth (the dead trees were cut by an enterprising woodcutter long ago). Frog-fishermen are the only humans who have entered the marsh since. The Bog's algae-covered, muddy waters are home to many unpleasant creatures.

The Bog's waters may well hide many small treasures. Countless corpses have been dumped in the Bog over the years of fighting in the North. Many victims have drowned in the Bog after dark following nearby battles, getting lost and collapsing as a result of their wounds. Today, the Bog remains a favorite corpse disposal site for brigands, thieves, and City folk who find it more convenient for someone to disappear than to be found dead.

If the PCs enter the Bog, DMs should use Table 2 to determine encounters. As with Table 1 before, roll 1d8 and 1d12, and add the results together to render encounters on Table 2.

Until swords part

Beyond these environs of Waterdeep lie the greater glories of the North. In the hands of a DM, more of their mysteries may well be revealed, and many of the secrets of the City of Splendors, too! Adventures galore await PCs in these lands of savage beauty - adventure enough to fill many lifetimes. Come: Bring a friend, and bring a sword - and that's two friends to keep close, for in the North a good sword is the best friend you can have. And what's an adventure without good friends to share it with?

Table 1
Rat Hills Random
Encounter Table

Roll	Encounter
2	1 mimic
3	1-6 skeletons
4	5-20 rot grubs in carrion
5	1 otyugh
6	1-4 jackalweres
7	4-16 wild dogs
8	4-24 wererats
9	5-50 giant rats
10	2-24 giant centipedes
11	5-50 giant rats
12	1-12 huge spiders
13	5-50 giant rats
14	1-3 leucrotta
15	1-4 ear seekers
16	2-12 poisonous frogs
17	1-12 zombies
18	1 neo-otyugh
19	1-4 catoblepas
20	Special encounter (Table 2) or DM's choice

Table 2
Stump Bog Random
Encounter Table

Roll	Encounter
2	1-3 catoblepas
3	1-3 gas spores
4	2-12 giant crabs
5	4-16 giant leeches
6	1-20 giant wasps
7	1-4 giant crayfish
8	4-16 giant leeches
9	5-40 giant frogs
10	1-2 lampreys
11	3-12 giant frogs
12	1-4 giant crayfish
13	3-12 giant rats
14	1-2 lampreys
15	1-3 shambling mounds
16	4-16 giant leeches
17	1-4 giant eels
18	2-12 giant lizards
19	1-3 will-o-(the)-wisps
20	Roll twice again on this table, or DM's choice of any monster.

Ω

It is surprising how few spell books are found in tombs and ruins, given the great profusion of magic users running about, isn't it? But perhaps not: the fascination and value of such works is enough to excite even the richest and mightiest passersby, and as a result, few of these books remain long undisturbed.

The sage Elminster has records of a good many, however, whose whereabouts are unknown to him, and which he believes presently lost to human use. (Interested DMs may find these appropriate for use as dungeon treasures or as components of a mage's library.) A selection of four sample texts from Elminster's records follow.

"Mhzentul's Runes"

Appearance: This tome is thin but heavy, comprised of twelve sheets of vellum sewn to a binding of silk and preserved with wax. It is said that the reddish hue of the wax is due to dragon's blood, and this preserves the binding. The truth of this rumor and the effectiveness of the ingredient are unknown. The binding is secured by silken cords to two pieces of oiled wood which have been covered entirely with stretched wyvern hide, held in place by small triangular wedges of silver. Thus far, the wood has not warped or broken, although curious, finger-shaped scorch marks on the hide attest to the heat the volume has endured. The book is not locked or bound, and has no known traps. It is signed with the sigil of Mhzentul:



History: Mhzentul was a powerful, respected mage. His end, men say, came at the battle of the River Rising, where he became a pillar of living flame and burned his way across the field, doing great harm to the hosts of his army, and blazed straight away out into the sea, where his flame was lost to view far out on the

"...Lhegrand believes that some portions of the process have been (deliberately?) omitted. . . . Even if this work is incomplete, it is still of immeasurable value, and (it) would bring a high price from most mages."

PAGES from the MAGES

A quartet of long-lost magical manuals

waves. Mhzentul is remembered among mages for his works, the "Seven Lost Rings of Mhzentul," and the book that has come to be known as "Mhzentul's Runes."

After Mhzentul's death, a party of treasure seekers, with utmost care and at great risk to themselves, overcame the traps and magics of Mhzentul's mountain abode and penetrated its innermost rooms, but found neither the rings nor the book on the premises. Rumors of the location of these treasures surfaced, citing such a profusion of sources and alleged whereabouts that the items became legendary, but their true resting place remains a mystery. Some six winters after the battle of the River Rising, the book is known to have come into the grasp of the adventurer Uthmang, a half-orc thief. He was immediately slain by the Red Wizard of Alail Thong, who in turn was defeated at Greenstone Keep by the priests of that place. It is not known what happened to the book then, but some two winters later it is said to have passed into the hands of Lhegrand the Sage, and it is from his catalogue we obtain the detailed description aforementioned. Lhegrand held the book only briefly before he was waylaid and enslaved by orcs out of Darkhold, and here we lose track of both book and rings for 'some seven winters, throughout which

the treasures presumably remained in evil hands. The evil mage Whisper is known to have found the rings, and is suspected to have had the book also, or at least access to it, but the whereabouts of both since his rumored death are not known.

Contents: The first four leaves of the book contain a detailed, exacting, and correct description — as attested to by the sage Lhegrand, an expert on the storage of spells within physical objects and substances — of the process of creating a *Ring of Spell Storing*. (The *Dungeon Masters Guide* briefly outlines this process.) It is known that at least four of the seven lost rings were of this type.

The five leaves that follow describe the process involved in creating rings that would, upon command, become guardian creatures under the control of the creator, but Lhegrand believes that some portions of the process have been (deliberately?) omitted. "I have not the skill nor the necessary components to enact the process," Lhegrand writes, "but herein I see no manner nor means for imbuing the creature with any animation, nor can I find any dweomercraft written for controlling the creature." Even if this section of the work is indeed incomplete, it is still of immeasurable value, and would bring a high price from most mages.

The third and final section of the work is more informal than the other two, consisting of Mhzentul's notes on his research in fire magic. Lhegrand reports that many runes, glyphs, and symbols are written in special inks upon these pages, and a mage of sufficient level could with diligence glean the complete spells *Fireball*, *Fire Shield*, *Fire Trap*, and *Delayed Blast Fire Ball* from Mhzentul's notes. The scope and thoroughness of Mhzentul's understanding of magic concerned with fire, however, is such that careful study of the book will decrease the time needed to research any fire-related spell by as much as two weeks, Lhegrand estimates.



“Nchaser’s Eiyromancia”

Appearance: This tome is thin, bound in black leather, and bears the title *Eiyromancia* on the cover, stamped and inlaid with mother-of-pearl. The edges of the tome have all about been protected with beaten copper strips, and these are fitted with two clasps. The clasps are unlatched by twisting a silver knob on each; if the bottom knob is twisted without first twisting and removing the top one, a poisoned needle springs up the side of the knob. The assassin Nathode says it is coated with Type D (or equivalent intensity) Insinuating poison, apparently renewed from a reservoir under the binding. Nathode did not handle the tome himself, but observed its effect upon another. His testimony verifies a folk legend which says that all who try to open *Nchaser’s Eiyromancia* die.

Nathode’s recollection dates back seven winters, when the book was brought to the court of Lord Nasher by a merchant, one Furjur the Flippant, who told the Lord that the tome was sold to him by a band of adventuring dwarves he encountered in a clearing deep in the northern forests. One of the members of Nasher’s court attempted to open the book, with fatal results (this is what Nathode observed), and it was placed unopened in the Lord’s library (Furjur had gifted it to the Lord in return for a charter). It was subsequently stolen during the riots of the Five Fires Rising, and its present whereabouts are unknown.

History: The mage Nchaser has not been seen for nearly twenty winters. Before his disappearance Nchaser wandered the Realms, working and seeking after magic, and upon two occasions served as an advisor to a local ruler. On the second of these occasions, while serving the High Captains of the city of Luskan, Nchaser wrote the *Eiyromancia* and gave it to the High Captain Taerl. Some time after Nchaser’s departure, the tome was stolen, and like its author it has wandered the Realms ever since. Alustriel, the High Lady of Silverymoon, had it briefly, gifting it to a dwarf of the Citadel Adbar. The dwarf never returned home, and the book was lost again —and so it

has gone through the years.

Contents: The wizard Arbane, who saw the book briefly while it was at Luskan (he was friend to the High Captain Suljack), reports that it contains four magic-user spells: *Nulathoe’s Ninemen* (pronounced *Nin-em-en*), a unique spell of the fifth level used to protect and preserve a dead body; *Nchaser’s Glowing Globe*, a unique spell of the fourth level which is used in the creation of luminous globes, and the rare spells *Part Water* and *Statue*. (A “unique” spell is a spell not commonly available, found only in the text in question or else believed to have been first set down therein. In some cases it means only that the text in question is the earliest surviving source of the spell.) The first of the unique spells was devised by Nchaser’s tutor Nulathoe, and the second is of Nchaser’s invention. By the kindness of Arbane the Mighty, both are reproduced below.

Nulathoe’s Ninemen

Level: 5

Range: *Touch*

Duration: *Permanent*

Components: *V, S, M*

Casting Time: *5 segments*

Saving Throw: *None*

Area of Effect: *One corpse*

Explanation/Description: This spell serves to protect dead creatures of all sorts against normal decay, magically strengthening the joints of corpses or corpse limbs to keep them supple and usable. Its most prevalent practical use is to preserve dead comrades for placing atop a bier in a sepulcher, or in hopes that they may be raised. The magic-user requires fresh blood from a creature of the same race/species as the spell subject, and the dust or powder resulting from the crushing of a moonstone of not less than 7 gp value. As the words of the spell are spoken, the most vital areas of the body (chest cavity, head and neck, joints of extremities) are sprinkled with a small amount of blood, and the whole body is then sprinkled with the moonstone dust. The closing gesture of the spell is the touching of the corpse, whereupon the spell will take immediate effect.



Note that this spell does not heal wounds or staunch bleeding.

Nchaser’s Glowing Globe

Level: 4

Range: *Touch*

Duration: *Permanent*

Components: *V, S, M*

Casting Time: *4 segments*

Saving Throw: *None*

Area of Effect: *Special*

Explanation/Description: This spell requires a globe of blown glass of the finest quality, and a spark. By the use of this spell the caster creates an effect identical to a *Continual Light* spell centered within a transparent object, but with the brightness of the light under the caster’s mental control. Continuous control need not be maintained; the caster can merely exert concentration to change the current luminosity of the globe, and it will continue to emit the desired amount of light until a new mental command is received (unless, of course, it should be destroyed). Mental control may be maintained over a globe from a distance of 9” per level of the caster (plus 4” per point of intelligence over 15). Control of a globe cannot be wrested from another except by means of a *Wish* or *Limited Wish* — or upon the death of the owner, whereupon the expectant owner must touch the globe to take mastery over it.

“The Book of the Silver Talon”

Appearance: This book is of papyrus, twenty-six leaves sewn into a leather binding. The leather has been dyed black with some thick, durable dye that remains supple and covers the hide deeply, preserving the tome somewhat. Into the front cover of this is inset a silver claw or talon (held by means of its nails, which pass through the hide and have been folded under shrewdly with a hammer so as to close the grip), from which the book has gained its name. The edges of the leaves have been painted red, rather unevenly, mottling the border of each page.

History: This book is believed to have been the workbook of the famous and much-feared archmage Asmiak, the “One Without Fear,” when he was but an apprentice to the wizard Thurl. The strongest proof for this belief comes from the talon device set in the cover (the book is untitled and unsigned), which Asmiak used at the time. This does not mean the book was necessarily his, but a study of Asmiak’s deeds reveals his recurring attempts to obtain the book (or re-obtain it, assuming he once possessed it). This indicates he knows the book exists, but its contents would be so superfluous to him now, at the height of his power, that

his attempts seem to be evidence of an emotional attachment to the tome. Asmiak’s attempts to possess the book have never been carried out personally, always by agents. At least eight former owners of the book, all of them magic users of low level, have met death because of Asmiak’s servants, and other owners of relatively higher levels have narrowly escaped the same fate. Their reports indicate that Asmiak employs a varied complement of servants, many of them not human. One survivor by the name of Casimur, an ex-magic user who now runs the Whistling Wizard Inn, relates that he was slain by three gar-

goyles, who fled with nothing but that one book from among those in his library, and that he found this out when he was subsequently raised by the cleric Steeleye.

The adventurer Steeleye confirms this incident, and adds that the gargoyles were slain with a shower of silver arrows by the elves of the High Forest as the creatures swooped low over the tree-tops, looking for a place to rest.

The gargoyles were flying east at the time, and Asmiak is rumored to live in that direction, far across deserts and mountains. The book fell into the forest, but was not recovered by the elves, and somehow found its way to a bazaar some winters later, where it was purchased by the astonished magician Phandal. He in turn exchanged it for other spells with the theurgist Alphon, who fled with the book into a forest to escape repeated goblin raids against his property. It is not known how Alphon fared after that, but the druid Rairun "Blackbrow" was the next known to have possessed the book. He tried to send it overland to a colleague, but the caravan vanished in the moorlands en route to its destination.

Although no trace of the caravan itself was ever found, an adventurer named Shoon later came across the book in the dungeons of a deserted castle and brought it to the city of Waterdeep. There he sold it to the merchant Deragus, who never had a chance to sell it, since his shop was robbed later the same night. The master thief Dunas is known to have had the book one winter later, and he traded it to an unknown magic-user for three magic weapons. The book's whereabouts at present are unknown. Dunas has been heard to say he's glad to be rid of the "Book of The Silver Talon," and any who find it would do well to conceal it, or risk attack from the servants of Asmiak.

Contents: The first twenty-two leaves of the book contain spells, all written in magical inks upon the papyrus in a slanted, beautiful hand, including the necessary runes, glyphs, and symbols and notes on necessary conditions and components. The spells are, in order of their appearance in the book: *Read Magic*, *Burning Hands*, *Comprehend Languages*, *Detect Magic*, *Erase*, *Write*, *Identify*, *Message*, *Shocking Grasp*, *Shield*, *Darkness 15' Radius*, *Detect Invisibility*, *Knock*, *Ray of Enfeeblement*, *Web*, *Wizard Lock*, *Blink*, *Dispel Magic*, *Gust of Wind*, *Infravision*, *Phantasmal Force*, and *Protection From Normal Missiles*.

Peculiar to the work are slight variations in the spells that appear to be Asmiak's own. The magician Phandal, who copied from the work spells he needed and noted the changes in those he already knew, notes that the *Burning Hands* spell developed by Asmiak (or taught to him by the wizard Thurl) took 4 segments to cast because of its longer

verbal component, and took the form of a thin beam of flame like a rod or staff extending from the caster's forefinger. This beam can be varied in length from 2 feet to 8 feet by force of will, but is stopped (and deflected, at possible hazard to the caster) by stone, thick wood, earth, and the like. Casimir, who retains this spell in his books, notes that it can be fanned back and forth rapidly by merely waving one's finger, and is therefore far more than a parlor trick for cutting ropes or lighting candles.

The twenty-third page of the book, which was beyond Casimir's mastery when he possessed it, contains notes on how to strengthen the spell's flame into a more potent weapon. This improved version is of the second level of spells, and the theurgist Alphon is thought to have employed it when battling trolls on the Evermoors. It takes six segments to cast, lasts for two rounds, and consists of a cone of flame extending 20 feet from the forefinger, 6 feet in diameter at its furthest extent. The intonation of the verbal component dictates how hot the flames



will be; they may be so hot as to create a breeze and cause target creatures to fall back from the heat. The flame does +1 damage (caster's level +1, expressed in hit points) 'in the first round after being cast, and damage equal to one-half the caster's level (rounded up) in the second round. Thus, a 7th-level caster does 8 points of damage to those struck in the first round, and 4 points to each victim in the second round. Phandal dubbed this spell the *Flame Ray*.

Other spell variations are minor. Asmiak's *Darkness 15' Radius* uses a tiny vial of ink smashed to the ground, serving as the center of the spell effect, as well as bat fur. Thus, the spell cannot be moved once cast, and the ink seems less effective than pitch or coal, because the spell lasts only 8 rounds, plus 1 per level of the caster. Asmiak specifies giant octopus ink, but Casimir has subsequently experimented with giant squid sepia, and reports that it also produces darkness, although of but 6 rounds (plus 1 per level of the caster) duration. Asmiak's version of the *Ray of Enfeeblement*

has a different verbal component than the accepted norm, and takes 3 segments to cast. It has a fixed range of 6", and a fixed duration of 8 rounds. Similarly, Asmiak's *Blink* spell has a fixed duration of 4 rounds, caused by the differences in both verbal and somatic components (the level and casting time remain the same).

Asmiak's *Gust of Wind* spell is an improved version; it emanates from a self-chosen extremity of the caster, and is thus directional — and the caster can rapidly change this direction. Its somatic component differs from the norm, and its material component is a sycamore seed cluster or milkweed seed (or similar seed, of the type having hairlike fibers that enable it to be borne aloft on a breeze).

The last three pages of the book are careful notes on the preparation of magical inks for all the first-level spells in the book. Users of the art will notice that these are not the only known ink formulas for these spells. Note that the formula for *Burning Hands* will probably not work for writing the spell in its usual form. Asmiak's notes follow:

The following instructions in each case will make ink sufficient to write a single spell. In such writing a quill from a magical beast must be used. (Asmiak does not define "magical beast"; refer to p. 117 of the DMG for what is actually meant.)

Read Magic

- 1 ounce giant squid sepia
- 1 large blue sapphire, powdered
- 1 medium carbuncle, powdered
(or substitute: 1 large rock crystal
and 1 eagle's eye
- alternatively: blue quartz equal in size
to a man's fist
and 2 eyes from a black falcon)
- 1 drop of the writer's blood
- 1 pinch of earth
- 1 sprinkle of water

Powder the rocks and gems in a mortar, and to them add the blood, the earth, and the water. Stir with a finger or a stick (or anything, so long as it is not metal) and mix into a paste. Put this into a crucible, and pass it into the tongue of an open flame. If eyes are used, hold these in the flame just above the open crucible and allow them to be consumed, so that any ash or juices produced will fall into the crucible. Allow the crucible to cool in a dark place. Then, under the light of a waxing or full moon, pour the brew into a flask or vial and stir in the sepia with a finger or other non-metal object.

Burning Hands

- 1 ounce giant octopus ink
- 3 drops gold dragon or red dragon blood
or: 2 ounces fire elemental phlogiston
or: 6 salamander scales
or: 1 efreeti horn
- 2 ounces green plant matter

4 ounces flesh
 (from a meaty mammal, but not human
 or humanoid)
 wood, 1 plank or log
 cloth, 1 scrap
 parchment, 1 sheet

A fire must be built in a brazier, stoked until hot, and fed in full sunlight with the wood, cloth, parchment, flesh, plants — all types of flammable or burnable things the spell will be able to affect. To this add the dragon blood or an alternative ingredient. Allow the fire to burn down, then remove one ounce of coals from the fire bed by hand and immerse them in the ink. The mixture should be stirred to break up the ash, but do not remove the sediment from the ink container — let the undissolved solid settle to the bottom and remain there. Cover and keep from air until cool.

Comprehend Languages

1 ounce giant squid sepia
 1 fresh tongue (from any mammal)
 1 medium sard (onyx), or powdered sard of equivalent amount
 the brain of a sage (see note below)

The sard should be crushed into powder if it is not already in that form. The brain should be placed in a crucible and boiled, while the preparer sprinkles the powdered sard into the fluid thus produced. The tongue (and any parts of the brain not reduced to liquid) should be put whole into the heart of a fire, perhaps suspended in a metal pot or otherwise contained — the ashes of those ingredients must be kept separate from the ashes of the fire's fuel — and when the fire burns down, the ashes should be stirred into the fluid first obtained. Allow this mixture to stand for 13 hours, and then pour it into a flask containing the sepia. Place the flask over a fire and bring the mixture slowly to a boil — do not stir. When the vapor given off darkens from red to black, take the flask away from the heat and seal the contents from the air until use.

Note: Some users of the book report that the brain of any intelligent creature which uses and understands languages may be used with success.

Detect Magic

1 ounce giant squid sepia
 oak, ash, and thorn branches sufficient for a small fire
 1 small sapphire, powdered
 1 drop of the writer's blood
 1 drop of spring water
 1 object which radiates a dweomer

Heat the squid sepia in a fire built of oak, ash, and thorn. Place the object or creature partially or wholly in the sepia, and let it remain there until the fire has burned out and the sepia is cool. While the fire is strong, add first the powdered sapphire, then the drop of water, and then the drop of blood, stirring the mixture once after each is added with a

thorn branch. Ensure that the branch is then consumed in the fire. Let the fire burn out, remove the cooled mixture, and pour it into a flask, taking care that the object with the dweomer is not admitted into the flask.

Erase

1 ounce of giant squid sepia
 1 ounce acid
 3 dozen caraway seeds, crushed
 1 chrysolite
 1 black pearl

The gems must be placed whole into the acid and allowed to dissolve. This can take up to two days. When the last trace of the gems is gone (there must be no precipitant), the acid should be boiled, and while it is boiling vigorously, the caraway should be added. It will neutralize the acid and leave the resulting liquid slightly hued, with a small amount of precipitant matter. This must be allowed to cool slowly, and then be stirred into the sepia with a rod or bar of cold iron.



"The book's whereabouts at present are unknown. Dunas has been heard to say that he's glad to be rid of 'The Book of the Silver Talon,' and any who find it would do well to conceal it, or risk attack from the servants of Asmiak."



Write

To set down the spell itself, the ink must be made as follows:

1 ounce giant octopus ink
 1 pinch graphite
 1 drop of the writer's blood
 1 basilisk eye
 1 whole plant (including roots), lady's mantle

Chop up the basilisk eye and the plant together, cover in a crucible, and burn to ash over a slow fire of seaborne driftwood or acorns. Add the graphite to the ink, and then the ash. Stir once with a wooden spoon or rod and then add the drop of blood. Cover quickly, shake, and let stand in the moonlight for a night.

When employing the spell, the desired writing must be copied with a special ink. Thurl says there are at least four known formulas for this ink; the intent is to create a neutral ink receptive to a dweomer, so as to capture the essence of a spell. The following ingredients will produce ink sufficient to write one spell, and they may be increased proportionally; add extra owl's eyes, spikenard, and sapphires to increase the quantity of ink

produced, but the quantities for sand, water, mistletoe, lead, and the gems other than the sapphires, remain the same.

1 ounce giant octopus ink
 1/2 ounce ichor of slithering tracker
 1 owl eye
 3 blue-green sapphires, as large and as fine as possible
 1 ruby (deep crimson)
 1 piece of jet
 1 piece of obsidian
 1 spikenard (root)
 1 pinch of sand
 1 drop of water
 1/4 ounce of lead
 1 sprig of mistletoe

Boil the spikenard, mistletoe, and owl eye in the ichor over a blazing fire. Pulverize and add the lead and the gems when the mixture is at a full boil, in the following order: sapphires, jet, lead, obsidian, and ruby, sprinkling each over the full surface of the boiling mixture. Take the mixture from the flames, stir in the giant octopus ink, and allow to cool uncapped in a windy place. Then add the sand and the water, and allow the container to stand for a full day, making sure it is exposed both to brilliant sunlight and bright moonlight.

Identify

1 ounce giant octopus ink
 1 clump of honey fungus plant
 1 bunch of fennel
 1 fist-sized piece of rose quartz
 1 drop of holy water
 1 saffron plant
 1 small, flawless diamond

Bottle the octopus ink in a silver vial, and take it to the woods at night. Live honey fungus is found on rotting bark and is readily identified by its pale green glow. Pluck it from the bark and submerge it straightaway in the vial, adding the drop of holy water immediately afterward. Cap the vial and warm it in a small fire. Meanwhile, crush and slice the fennel and saffron into a bowl of water, and powder the rose quartz. Add the powder to the silver vial, and shake. Then take the vial from the fire, and allow it to cool in a dark place. Place the bowl over the fire and let the water boil away. Powder the diamond and add it to the water during the boiling. Add the residue to the silver vial, seal, and place under pure, fast-running spring water for at least six days. Store the ink in the silver vial when not in use.

Message

1 ounce giant squid sepia
 1 human or humanoid ear
 1 human tongue (from a different body than the ear)
 1 floral crown from an angelica plant
 1 turnip
 3 shoots of fox-tail grass
 6 hedge mustard leaves
 1 drop of dew
 Harvest a drop of dew from fern leaves

beneath the light of the full moon. Place a cauldron of water over a fire, add the dew, and heat to a boil. Dice the organic ingredients separately, and add them to the boiling mixture in the following order: the tongue, angelica, hedge mustard, foxtail, turnip, and last the ear, stirring well with a wooden rod or spoon after each infusion. Allow the mixture to boil gently until the liquid is vaporized. Gently warm the sepia over a small flame. Scrape the residue from the inside of the cauldron and stir it into the sepia. Keep heating the mixture for one hour, stirring frequently. Allow it to cool slowly and stand undisturbed for one day.

Shocking Grasp

1 ounce giant octopus ink
1 ounce of ash from a lightning-struck tree

4 drops holy water
1 sapphire, powdered
1 pinch powdered gold
asafetida
balm of gilead
ginseng
mace (or masterwort)

The herbal ingredients must be burnt to ash in an oak fire. This ash is then added to the ash of the lightning-struck tree in a small metal bowl (copper or gold is best). Add two drops of holy water and stir the mixture into a paste. Then add the powdered gold and powdered sapphire and stir in the other two drops of holy water. When this paste is thoroughly mixed, add it to the ink and heat to a boil, stirring until the paste is dissolved. Allow the mixture to stand out of doors for a day and a night.

Shield

1 ounce giant octopus ink
1 human thumbnail
1 pinch of iron (filings)
1 piece of rock crystal
1 pebble
1 beryl
1 star sapphire

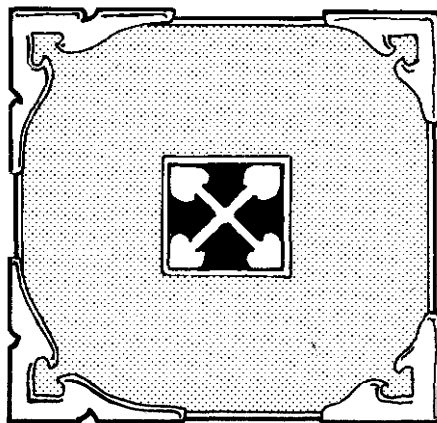
Burn the thumbnail to ash. Pulverize the rock crystal and the pebble separately, then do likewise with each of the two gems. Heat the octopus ink over a small fire but do not let it come to a boil. Add, stirring widdershins, the other ingredients in this order: the pebble dust, the iron filings, the rock crystal dust, the beryl dust, and the dust of the sapphire. Stir until all of these have been thoroughly mixed and partially dissolved, and then add the thumbnail ash. Allow to cool slowly as the fire dies.

"The Chambeeleon"

Appearance: This tome is truly splendid. Its covers are sheets of polished, iridescent abalone edged and cornered with beaten gold; its pages are of burnished electrum, into which script has been etched and runes, glyphs, symbols and characters are embossed or raised from the surface. The work is demonstrably waterproof. The Chambeeleon (pronounced *Kam-bee-lee-on*) is probably worth 4,000 gp in materials alone. It is worth far more to a magic-user, however, because of its contents.

History: The origin of this tome is unknown, but it is certainly of great antiquity. Many legends exist ascribing its authorship to various sea gods and powerful beings, but nothing of the book's whereabouts is verifiable until Alaer, holder of the Dolphin Throne an age ago, mentions it in an inventory of the sea elves' court at Thunderfoam. It was borne away from that city at some later time, and reappears in the memoirs of the hero Galadaunt, who found it on the deck of an abandoned, drifting "ghost ship" which he boarded off the Emerald Isles. He sold it to a magic-user whose name was not recorded, who we know to have been the tutor of one called "The Mad Mage," who in turn was master to the wizard Arbane. It is likely that the Chambeeleon came into the Mad Mage's possession, but it did not pass into the hands of Arbane, so we have only Arbane's recollections to rely on for its contents. The present location of the Chambeeleon, or even if it still exists, is unknown.

Contents: Arbane said that he often read from the Chambeeleon as he was trained, but was only allowed to peruse certain pages. Many he glimpsed were beyond his understanding, but he remembers that the demon who guarded the book told him it had 66 pages in all and none but Arbane's master had ever mastered them all.



(Arbane's rather brief description of the demon suggests that it was a succubus. There is no mention of a guardian demon in the legends concerned with the book, so it is likely that the Mad Mage bound the demon to guard it, perhaps only for as long as Arbane was allowed access to its pages.)

All of the pages Arbane studied contained spells. From his notes, he gives us this list: *Water Breathing, Fly, Lightning Bolt, Fire Shield* (cold flame version only), *Ice Storm, Airy Water, Cone of Cold, Conjure Elemental* (see below), *Disintegrate, Glassee, Part Water, Spiritwrack, Cacodemon, Drawmij's Instant Summons, Reverse Gravity, and Vanish*. "From the Mad Mage's casual comments," writes Arbane, he believes the book also contains the spells *Imprisonment* and *Prismatic Sphere*, but at the time lacked any means to verify this. If the book is entirely full of spells, and each stands alone on one page (as did those Arbane studied), then there may be as many as fifty spells in the work not on Arbane's list. One suspects, however, that there are far fewer, and most of the unknown pages contain records or other writing. Only the possessor of the work knows for sure.

Arbane mentions one important dif-

"If the book is entirely full of spells, and each stands alone on one page, then there may be as many as fifty spells in the work not on Arbane's list. . . . Only the possessor of the work knows for sure."

ference from the norm in the spells contained in the book: the *Conjure Elemental* spell as it is written therein will summon only water elementals, but these will be friendly to the caster and will never attack him or her.

Such an elemental may (5% chance) return to its own plane before the spell has expired, rather than attacking, and although friendly, it will act only upon the commands of the spellcaster, not helping independently.

If one may trust the more doubtful source of religious teachings, it must be noted that the priesthoods of at least seven aquatic gods worshipped by various creatures claim the Chambeeleon as their own, and assert that the bulk of its pages contain "the" record of the Creation associated with their deity. If this is so, none have proved it.

The sage Elminster has recorded dozens of powerful spell books and magical documents of all descriptions; the preceding are but a sample. He writes teasingly of scores of new spells, hitherto unknown to magic users "at large," and now-lost powers cryptically held within the lost volumes. Adventurers may bring word of more any day, he says, puffing contentedly on his clay pipe. . . .



LORD OF THE DARKWAYS

By *Ed Greenwood*

Illustration by Kekai Kotaki

Deadly Success

Flickering glows shaped two doors out of empty air, at either end of the large, dark room. The warrior strode through the one at the far end of the room, vanished in midstep—and reappeared stepping through the nearer glowing portal.

Where he stiffened in midstride to topple, spasming and thrashing helplessly—a strangled scream whistling through his working jaws—and

crash face-first to the floor. His eyeballs burst, spattering the flagstones with a foul wetness that hissed into racing wisps of smoke, even before a larger flood spilled out of his mouth to join it.

The tall, slender man in black nodded in satisfaction. Six strong Zhentilar warriors had all found the same swift death.

Consistent results. His new spell was a success. Smiling, he walked away.

*

Another Stormy Night

“My superiors at the temple? They think I’m trying to induce my brother to kiss the Holy Lash, of course. Which reminds me: you will embrace Loviatar before all other gods, won’t you, Handreth?”

The wizard across the table gave her a mirthless half smile.

“I’ll consider it,” he said dismissively—then grinned, the bright, boyish flash of teeth Ayantha had known forever. She found herself grinning back.

“So, what brings a high-spells wizard from Waterdeep to cold, uncultured, mage-hating Zhentil Keep?”

“Coins, of course. Lots of them. And by ‘mage-hating,’ I presume you mean Manshoon and his magelings don’t welcome wizards other than themselves?”

“I do. They don’t. Walk warily, Han.” She laid a long, barbed whip of many leather strands on the table, murmured a high-soundless prayer over it, then raised her eyes to his again and asked, “Who’s your patron?”

“A merchant hight Ambram Sarbuckho—if you don’t dissuade me from showing up at his doors by what you tell me of him.”

Ayantha shifted in her seat, supple black leather and tight strands of chain moving in ways meant to catch the eye, and gave him another smile. “So you sought out your little sister to learn how things lie here in the keep before taking service. I like that.”

Handreth shrugged. “To rise to become a dark-lash of Loviatar—nay, just to survive this long, in service to the Maiden of Pain—takes wits. Wizards soon learn how hard it is to trust. You have wits, and I trust you. So here we are, in this vastly overpriced

excuse for a highcoin drinking club, spending my gold. Speak.”

His sister sighed. “We’re not noble, so this is the best Zhentil Keep can offer us. Sit with your hands on the table, palms up. Please.”

“So you can . . . ?”

“So I can lash you across your palms if someone comes into the room, to make them believe a dark-lash of the pain goddess is meeting alone with an outlander wizard for the right reasons.”

Handreth put his hands on the table, palms up. “I believe I paid for a private room.”

“You did. In the keep, there’s ‘private’ and then there’s ‘private.’ Again, we’re not noble. Or Zhentarim.”

Handreth nodded to signal he’d taken her point. Outside the leaded windows, the wind rose with a sudden whistle. Winter hadn’t thrust its talons into Zhentil Keep just yet, but it was fast approaching, and bringing its cold with it. A time of whirling falling leaves, chill winds, and short, violent, icy rains. Puddles would form brittle skins of thin ice by night but melt every morn, for about a tenday. Then the snows would come, long before the Year of the Blazing Brand found its end.

“Ambram Sarbuckho is one of the wealthiest keep merchants,” Ayantha told him, dropping her voice to a whisper. “He’ll be given a lordship only if he joins the Zhentarim, though, and thus far he shows no signs of doing so. He’s a glib schemer, always spinning little plots and swindles—and, I should warn you, he has hired an endless succession of serve-for-a-month wizards, rather than trying to buy the loyalty of one or two he keeps at his side for many seasons.”

“So he’s difficult?”

“All successful keep merchants are difficult, Brother. This one is open in his mistrust of everyone; he probably hires more informers than anyone in the city—after Manshoon, of course. He’s . . . just as untrustworthy as he judges everyone else to be.”

“I’ve done business with his factors in Sembia and Waterdeep, a time or ten; what’s he known for, here at home?”

“A dealer in sundries, and importer of curios from afar.”

“Huh.” Handreth Imbreth grunted. “Someone a city ruler’ll be suspicious of, right there.”

His sister smiled thinly. “It’s been a bare few months since Manshoon became First Lord of Zhentil Keep, his toady Lord Chess was named Watchlord of the Council, the priests of Bane started acting as if they were the watch, and we had eye tyrants lecturing us in our own streets. In Zhentil Keep, *everyone’s* suspicious of everyone else. Watch your back, Brother—and never stop watching it.”

“I thought Manshoon was yesterday’s tyrant,” Handreth muttered, “and some Lord Bellander or other is kinging it now, here in the keep.”

His sister shook her head. “Folk in the streets believe that, and about half the merchants; the rest of us have wits enough to know Bellander’s coup was staged by Manshoon himself. He’s enthroned Bellander to be the target of those enraged by the new taxes and what’s done by all swordsmen now making the lord’s rule—*Manshoon’s* rule, in truth—a thing of teeth, offering instant obedience or death. Bellander’s a handsome, lecherous fool whose brains are about up to the task of outwitting yonder bowl of flower petals.”

“Ah.” Handreth nodded. “I’m familiar with the tactic; Waterdeep has seen it work a time or three, too.”

Ayantha took up her lash, cracked it in the air, and brought it crashing down across the table. Handreth deftly plucked up his goblet before any wine could spill from it.

"We all know Manshoon's up to something, and that he will move fast when he strikes," she announced, lashing the table again as the door opened and an impassive servant brought more wine, unbidden. She held silence until the servant withdrew, then struck the new decanter of wine aside, to shatter on the floor untasted.

Handreth nodded approvingly, and she inclined her head and went on.

"We just don't know yet what he'll do. All the spies we can pay—and keep alive, once we start paying them—tell us Fzoul, who speaks for Bane in this city, is still far too furious with the First Purring Lord to aid him in any way, though they'll end up working together eventually . . . and the beholders have told him bluntly, at least once, that he's on his own for now. My thinking is that they want to see if he can really establish rule over the city before they spend any more effort backing him."

She sipped the last from her goblet, set it down, and added, "Yet that just ensures he *will* do something; he has to prove himself, and soon, before all the lords he outraged at council manage to kill him off or just fill his platter with so many plots, coups, and small swindles and treacheries that he'll have no time to do anything but fight them off. So far, he's divided his time between summoning keep lords and merchants to private talks whereat he gently threatens them, training his ever-growing bands of ruthless warriors and magelings behind wards no one can penetrate, and spending days in seclusion, no doubt crafting dastardly new spells. We

keep expecting his spellchamber door to open, and golems as tall as castle towers, and undead dragons with sixteen grafted-on heads, to come bursting out and lay waste to the keep . . . but thus far, only he comes strolling out."

Silence fell.

Ayantha lifted an eyebrow. "Have I frightened you into scuttling back to the City of Splendors yet, Brother?"

Handreth smiled slowly, and his eyes began to glow red.

At the sight of that, the darklash hissed and stiffened, arching back away from him in her chair.

Then she brought her lash around with vicious skill, letting the wizard taste it, right across his face.

His smile never changed.

"This," he told her, as her lash suddenly twisted in her hands, its strands leaping to coil around her neck and throttle her—then just as swiftly dropped away, leaving her reeling in her seat, coughing and gagging, "sounds like fun."

*

The Spellchamber Door Opens

A tall, slender, darkly handsome man sat alone at the head of a long, polished table, his fingers clasped together under his chin. He was thinking, behind the faint half smile on his face that betrayed nothing.

In order to truly rule Zhentil Keep—not just lord it over the council—it would be necessary to break the power of the richest and most influential city merchants. Not to mention the hired wizards working for them.

The nobles he had already conquered, or could destroy at will. He just needed them to refrain from mustering arms against him and banding together while he dealt with the merchants.

The waylords. The sixteen men who could sway or cow all the other merchants and shopkeepers of the keep.

The sixteen who could not be throttled by surrounding their mansions and warehouses, and ruling the streets with sword and fist. The merchants whose mansions held Zhentil's Darkways, long-established magical gates linking those proud houses with certain mansions in Sembia. Allowing these sixteen to shuttle warriors, craftworkers, goods, and coins back and forth at will and in secret. Advantages that had won them all Sembian investments and Sembian backers whose aid they could easily call upon.

So "waylord" was a good name for them, even if only the Zhentarim called them by that name, or knew the sources of their power. To most citizens, they were merely the powerful merchants who dominated city life; folk to befriend and deal fairly with, who it was *very* unwise to make enemies of unless departing the city swiftly, never to return, and able to run far and fast. Sixteen men who shared a secret, but were a loose, often-feuding group, not a cabal or guild.

Yet true lords of the keep, for all that. Sixteen citizens who could quietly bring armies into the city without having to fight past the city walls or disembark at the docks.

They threatened the rule of anyone who sat on a throne in Zhentil Keep by their very existence. So they must die, and soon. The Zhentarim must seize and command their portals.

He had known this for years, but only now were his spells ready. Only now could he strike.

It was merely a matter of not putting a foot wrong in his swift, well-planned advance.

"If there is to be a Lord of the Darkways," Manshoon told the empty air around him, "let it be me."

He smiled at how much information he'd gathered by impersonating the wizard he'd just slain, Handreth Imbreth. Darklash Ayantha had screamed long and loud, and had proved every bit as tough as he'd expected. She should still be alive to scream for him a last time or two, when he was done here.

He reached out and pulled the cord that would tell his servants to open the doors and let his three most trusted underlings into the room.

*

Waylords, Waylords Everywhere

"He wants to know all you can call to mind of the waylords, so start thinking," Sneel said unpleasantly.

Kelgoran glowered. One day, Lorkus Sneel would take a step too far . . .

"Don't ever make the mistake of thinking the Brotherhood's warriors are dullards," Cadathen warned Sneel, as calmly as if he'd been discussing unchanging weather.

"I don't," Manshoon's most accomplished spy replied coldly and flatly.

"Very well then," the wizard Manshoon trusted most—because, they all knew, his Art was far too feeble to challenge the master's—replied affably, "don't make the mistake of treating them as if they are. It will only turn to bite you, when you'll least be able to afford that."

"Spare me your granddam's advice," Sneel hissed. He turned to face the warrior again. "Well?"

Ornthen Kelgoran was a veteran of many skirmishes in Thar and beyond, a hardened warrior who had become wise to the ways of the crowded stone city of Zhentil Keep, and who was Manshoon's best slayer of those who crossed him. He smiled.

"Well, what?"

Sneel sighed. "Don't be—"

"A dullard? Sneel, your arrogance is only surpassed by your inability to judge others. A serious failing in a spy, I'd say."

Before Sneel could reply, the warrior swept out one brawny forearm in a florid herald's gesture, a violent movement that made the spy flinch.

Kelgoran chuckled and began to declaim. "Most important among the waylords—those the rest will follow—are five men."

He held up one hairy finger. "Srabbast Dorloun, a dealer in textiles and footwear, and a greedy, coldly calm, burly mountain of a man. I know little of his hired wizard, Tanthar of Selgaunt, beyond an impressive reputation: scruples, powerful magic, widely traveled."

A second finger rose. "The importer of smoked meats and fine wines Besnar Calagaunt, who reminds me very much of you, Sneel. Thin, apt to sneer—but unlike you, handsome and elegant. Unmarried, too, and a scourge of the ladies—but a devout follower of Loviatar who lives and works with two young priestesses of the pain goddess, Darklash Ayantha and Painclaw Jessanna. I expect he's covered with scars, under all those silken jerkins."

A third finger joined the other two. "Fantharl Halamaun, perhaps the wealthiest of the lot; he can afford *two* wizards of reputation: Ardroth Thautan

of Chessenta, and a handsome, mustache-twirling Tethyrian who styles himself Valandro the Mysterious and defends himself with three swords that fly around under his command. You can be sure the master pays special attention to *him*."

"Leave the wizards to the master," Sneel said coldly. "Tell me of Halamaun."

"Short, ugly, a glutton. Grasping and greedy; the man's a landlord and a coinlender, what more need I say?"

"His trades."

"Uh, builder. And repairer of most buildings in the keep."

"Very well. Your fourth?"

"Mantras Jhoszelbur. Trader in metals and ores, owns our biggest foundry, two weaponsmi—"

"Three. He owns three, and is busily buying out a fourth."

"Very well. *That* many weaponsmiths' shops, five ships I know of"—Kelgoran paused, one brow raised in challenge, but Sneel merely nodded, so the warrior continued—"two steadings where war-horses are bred, reared, and trained, and a smallish coster or two.

"More interesting than all of that, though: Stormwands House. His own little school of wizardry, composed of the elderly mage Paerimrel of Amn and a dozen or so students, all young. They call themselves 'the Stormwands.' Jhoszelbur's old, short tempered, and—"

"Who are the most powerful of the Stormwands, the ones we must be wary of?"

"—ruthless. There are two Stormwands to beware: Rorymrrar and Jonthyn. My men and I have gone drinking with them more than once, under the master's orders. They are . . . less accomplished

than they believe themselves to be, but dangerous nonetheless.”

“That’s four. The fifth?”

“Ambram Sarbuckho, a—”

Four guards in full and gleaming black armor stepped through the tapestries in front of them, then drew the tapestries back and secured them with chains. The full-face helms that kept them anonymous made their voices boom; the nearest commanded, “Enough. The master is not in a patient mood. Enter.”

The doors were thrust wide, revealing a thin wisp of smoke that coiled and then rose like a snake about to strike.

The three men had never seen such magic before, but they knew better than to hesitate. They strode forward, right through the smoke, and the guards slammed the doors behind them and went to their crossbows, fixed by firing ports that pierced the walls of the room beyond. Their loaded and ready bolts were tipped with a poison only Manshoon would take no harm from—for the First Lord of Zhentil Keep was a careful man.

*

The Prize of Indispensability

Manshoon waved the three to the waiting seats at the far end of the long, polished table, and regarded them expressionlessly. These were his most accomplished servants, which meant they were adept at acting loyal.

Sneel, Cadathen, and Kelgoran—useful to him in that descending order, yet utterly disposable whenever the need arose.

“As Sneel has no doubt revealed without actually saying so,” he said flatly, “I have decided to free Zhentil Keep from the tyranny of the waylords. Now.”

He looked to his spy. “Begin subtly spreading word through our usual mouths that Halamaun is finally sick of Dorloun, and is covertly gathering hired bully-blades to start killing Dorloun’s employees, suppliers, and clients whenever they can be caught alone.”

He waited for Sneel to nod then added, “You are also to start rumors that Jhoszelbur has decided to crush his longtime and increasingly successful rival Calagaunt. Further, you are to ensure that servants of all the waylords hear that the First Lord of the city is gathering power to decide who shall rise as lords in Zhentil Keep, and who shall be forced out of trade, the keep, and if need be, continued life. Then report back to me for additional orders.”

Sneel nodded, but made no move to rise. The hint of a smile rose to Manshoon’s lips.

“You are dismissed. Tarry not to try to overhear my orders to these two.”

“Of course,” Sneel replied, nodding low over the table before rising and smoothly making for the doors.

Manshoon waited for a signal—a single tap against the wall—after the doors had closed behind his departing spymaster. Then he looked at Kelgoran and spoke again.

“Gather your worst and most bumbling blades—those we need to test, and can easily afford to lose—for assaults on the mansions of Dorloun, Halamaun, and Jhoszelbur. Muster them at the warehouses, at the slaughterhouse, and at the Black Barrel; you choose which, for which. They’re not to move, show themselves, or swing blades at anyone before I say so.”

Kelgoran’s nod was quick, and came with a pleased smile; he had already risen before Manshoon added, “Yes, you’re dismissed.”

The warrior’s eager hastening brought a swift closing of the doors and the tap that followed them, leaving Manshoon and Cadathen alone together.

Whereupon the First Lord of Zhentil Keep drew a small, plain bone goblet from under the table, then an even smaller knife. Cadathen went pale.

“A renewal,” Manshoon said calmly, drawing the blade along the outside edge of his hand. Dark red blood welled out, and he held his hand to let it run down his fingers and drip into the goblet, as he licked the knife clean, and slid it across the table to Cadathen.

Who deftly trapped it with his hand, rose and came to the goblet, gave himself a similar wound, licked the knife, and set it carefully down beside Manshoon, his hands trembling slightly.

When the goblet was full, the master’s murmured word and swift gesture would enact the blood spell. After they both drank, any harm suffered by Manshoon would instantly also be dealt to Cadathen.

White-faced, he whispered, “Why is this necessary, Lord? Again?”

Manshoon smiled. “Call it a precaution that should hurt a loyal Cadathen not at all, but bestow upon a Cadathen of darker deed or intent a fitting traitor’s reward. I need your silence, but also need you to know my plan, so you can adjust matters out in the streets and mansions to ensure it has the effects I desire. So heed well.”

He cast the spell, they both drank from the glowing goblet, and Manshoon waved Cadathen back to his seat.

Only after the still-pale wizard was settled again did he add, “The waylords will be broken—or

eliminated—by an enchantment I have just perfected, that will very soon be cast upon all of the Darkways. Anyone who passes through those portals thereafter will die, horribly and instantly, as my spell transforms all the blood in their veins to a potent flesh-melting acid.”

Cadathen looked excited, but uneasy. “But will the Darkways not prove useful, in time to come?”

“They will. As doors that open when I want them to, not doors standing open always that can let sellsword armies hired in Sembia flood into the very heart of Zhentil Keep whenever some greedy Sembian or other decides our gems and metals make the keep worth the trouble of plundering. Even beholders can only slay so many sellswords before they get overwhelmed and hacked apart. And should such a dark day come, wizards like me—and you—will survive far less time than elder eye tyrants like Argloth or Xalanxlan.”

Cadathen nodded, wincing.

“So traversing the Darkways will be fatal except when I remove my spells,” Manshoon purred. “And only I will know when those times are. Making me too valuable for anyone who cares for Zhentil Keep to slay. I love being indispensable.”

*

Windtatter Moon Rising

Rain had stopped lashing at the windowpanes, and there was moonlight at last.

A weary but very happy Lord Bellander rose on his elbows and gazed out the window.

“Ah,” he murmured. “A windtatter moon.”

“Indeed,” replied the senior priestess lying bare and beautiful in the bed beside him. “It’s why I’m here.”

Bellander lifted an eyebrow. “Oh? Not for me?”

Bride of Darkness Orpharla sat up rather briskly. “The Dread God revealed to Lord Holy Fzoul that the next windtatter moon would bring great peril to House Bellander. I’m here to keep you alive until morning.”

“And after that?”

“After that, Lord Bellander,” Orpharla said coldly, “your survival is in your own hands. Our most recent visions suggest we’ll be rather busy trying to keep Zhentil Keep from erupting into civil war.”

*

The Reapers Loosed

There arose heavy thuds of many staves and axes crashing against the doors, right on cue. His hired armsmen had timed matters rather well.

In response, guards shouted and came running; Manshoon smiled tightly and worked the spell that would make them *really* shout.

They did more than that. Some of them screamed and fled wildly through the mansion, crashing past tables and toppling sculptures and suits of armor.

The illusion he’d spun, of a beholder drifting menacingly forward, all of its eyestalks writhing, would circle the room he was in now.

The room where Waylord Fornlar Darltreth’s Darkway flickered and glowed, now alone and unguarded.

His more important casting didn’t take long; this was his tenth murmuring of the spell. When he was done, the Darkway blazed up brightly for a moment as if angered by his magic, then settled back down to glowing just as it had before.

The First Lord of Zhentil Keep gave it a sardonic salute and smile, and let his ring take him on to the next mansion.

Most of the waylords were elsewhere, gathered at Harlstrand House—whose wine cellar was the best, and feasting hall the grandest—to debate what to do about a certain upstart Manshoon and his rising power in the city. Snel was very good at what he did; one waylord-shaking crisis, conjured up in less time than it took to eat a good meal.

He stood now in a rather colder room, hung with dark tapestries and occupied by another Darkway—and two astonished guards, who raised their spears and reached for an alarm gong.

Manshoon waved one hand and gave them slumber. His armsmen would need some time to hasten through the streets and reach the front doors of this high house; it would be best if no alarm was raised until their sudden assault on its doors.

This was all going very smoothly. He strode to where he could stand over the guards, and look to see if they had any useful magic he could confiscate.

“Let the reaping begin,” he murmured aloud, “and the fortunes of the waylords wane.”

*

Interlude in Innarlith

“Outlander!” the High Constable of Innarlith roared, “Come forth!”

On either side of his broad, bright-armored shoulders stood a trio of impassive constables, their armor as gleaming as his own, wands ready in their hands. When one challenges a wizard, it is best to be prepared.

High Constable Lhoreld smote the door with his mace, a glancing blow that marked but did not dent it—yet sent an echoing thunder through the bedchamber behind that door. “Elminster!” he bellowed. “You were seen to steal royal paints and brushes, and bring them to this place! Thief, stand forth!”

The door swung open.

Out of the lamplit dimness beyond strode a tall, slender, white-bearded man, barefoot and in fact—the High Constable’s eyes bulged—wearing only hundreds of smears of dried paint and a lady’s diaphanous nightgown pulled around himself. He leaned unconcernedly against the doorpost in what could only be described as an indolent—even jaunty—pose.

“Aye? Have ye brought wine?”

High Constable Lhoreld went a little crimson around the temples, and his nostrils flared. On either side of him, his constables went from looking impassive to looking stern, as they hastily leveled their wands at the man in the doorway.

“You stand in the Fortress Royal, wizard!” Lhoreld shouted. “In the name of the Spaerenza, Royal Ruler of Innarlith, I arrest you to face justice! You have stolen her art supplies—”

Elminster made a rude sound, and a ruder gesture. “Pah! I have *not*.”

“Do—do you *mock* me, man?” The High Constable was incredulous. “The Spaerenza’s paints are all *over* you, from head to toe! D’you think me *blind*?”

“Nay,” Elminster drawled. “Merely stupid.” He peered, to make sure none of the constables was clutching a decanter behind his back, then added, “Too stupid to bring any wine, at least.”

“I’ll not bandy words with you, wizard! I require your instant submission—on your knees, man, and

hold out your wrists to be manacled! You’ll be brought before Her Exaltedness for your punishment forthwith, and—”

“Punishment? Surely ye might want to determine my guilt, first? Or perhaps my innocence? Or has Innarlith no laws at all but the whim of its High Constable?”

Lhoreld was now purple and shaking. “Do—do you *seriously* mean to claim you did not steal art supplies, when sworn witnesses—over a score of servants and courtiers—saw you do so?”

“I do mean to make that very claim. I stole *nothing*. And I can produce my own witnesses to attest to my claim.”

“Oh? Outlanders in your employ?” The High Constable sneered.

“No, personages that even a thick-headed wind-bag of a High Constable might have heard of. Let me begin with the Spaerenza herself. Then a certain Lord Wizard of the city, Uldimar Bronneth—ye may know him better as the Marquavarl; their son, Prince Hajorn, oh, and the Princesses Amaelra and Marinthra, too.”

“Ah *hah*. You are aware that bearing false witness against the royal family of Innarlith is itself a very serious crime?”

“I am,” Elminster confirmed, smilingly. “I believe ye’ll find them happy to state my innocence in this matter.”

The High Constable’s utter disbelief was written very clearly across his face. “Oh? And I suppose the Lord Protector can speak for you, too?”

“No, I fear not,” Elminster replied gravely. “However, both of his subordinates—the Dukes Henneth and Porlandur—were present, and can attest—”

“I’ll bet they can.” Lhoreld sneered. “I’ll just bet they can. In fact, wizard, I’m going to wager my career on that. If you can’t get any of these worthies to swear your words are true, you’ll wither away to bones chained to the coldest, wettest wall in the deepest of our dungeons, down where the rats go to die! I’ll escort you there myself, without delay! Stand forth from yon doorway, or my men will smite you down!”

“Really,” Elminster said reprovingly, like a kindly but disappointed mother to an angry child, “that won’t be necessary—”

“Wizard, step away from yon door!”

With a sigh and a shrug, spreading open and empty hands, Elminster did as he was commanded, the constables smoothly surrounding him—whereupon the constable directly behind Elminster was imperiously swept aside by someone else coming to the door.

The new arrival was a tall, scantily clad woman whose fine features were known to everyone in Innarlith—from the coins in their purses, if from nowhere else. She pointed a glowing scepter at Lhoreld.

“I *trust* you recognize me, High Constable,” she said softly, ignoring the trembling, retreating constables to stare steadily at Lhoreld.

He went pale, fought to keep his gaze above her chin, then flushed and hastily looked away, stammering, “Y—yes, Great Spaerenza. I—”

“As it happens, Lord Elminster *did* spend the night with me. And my husband. After agreeing to my request, relayed by the Marquavarl—”

Right on cue, the Lord Wizard of Innarlith appeared in the doorway beside the Spaerenza. His nakedness was only partially concealed behind an

unfinished portrait he was carrying, of an entwined naked couple whose features—though not yet entirely limned—were unmistakably those of the ruler of Innarlith and her husband. Straightening the painting, he gave Lhoreld what could only be described as a sheepish smirk.

The High Constable swallowed, looked at the floor, and firmly turned his attention back to what the Spaerenza was still saying.

“—to paint us, something that was overheard and applauded by all three of our royal offspring, and the Dukes Henneth and Porlandur, just as the Lord Elminster has informed you. I *trust* you will believe me, despite your reluctance to extend the same courtesy to him?”

“I—ah—uh—yes, Your Exaltedness! I—ah—most humbly apologize for—”

Lhoreld’s clumsy attempt at groveling was interrupted by a soundless thunder that smote every brain and stilled all sound for as long as it took a bright blue mist to arise out of nowhere and wash through the Fortress Royal.

Everyone trembled from the sheer force of magic rolling through them, as lightning raced through the mist.

Hair stood on end, all over everyone’s body, as the awed constables went to their knees, followed by Lhoreld and the Lord Wizard . . . and then, weeping in ecstasy, the Spaerenza herself.

They were all staring at two eyes in the mist, eyes the size of warriors’ shields that were drifting nearer in the air, heading unblinkingly for the paint-smear man who was still on his feet.

Elminster, you are needed urgently in Zhentil Keep.

“Goddess,” Elminster murmured, going down on one knee.

The force of Mystra’s divinity had driven the constables face-down on the floor, as the royal couple of Innarlith gaped at the great face now shaping itself out of the air.

Manshoon has altered the Darkways, making passage through them fatal. The dead include many of the Art, including accomplished mages like Ardroth Thauntan, Hoal of the Stormwands, and Handreth Imbreth of Waterdeep, the latest of Sarbuckho’s hirelings. Mend this crime, El.

“Lady, I will,” Elminster promised, rising and reaching a hand toward the bedchamber door. His robes, clout, boots, and belt of many pouches raced to him.

Wizards must not be slain out of hand, be they the cause of this or not—yet destroy not the gates.

Elminster nodded, boots in hand—as blue light flared around him, and he was gone.

And with him went mist, lightning, Mystra, and all.

Leaving the folk of Innarlith blinking at each other across a suddenly empty passage.

Rising unsteadily, tears still raining from her chin as if from a downspout, the Spaerenza gave her High Constable a rather rueful grin.

“I’d say it’s a good thing you didn’t actually arrest our guest, Lhoreld. It makes it far easier for all of us to forget any of this happened, don’t you think?”

*

An Unlooked-For Messenger

The alleyway was thankfully deserted, but the cold and the distinctive reek—an unhealthy mix of smelting, woodsmoke from a thousand-some chimneys, and rotting fish—told him he’d arrived in Zhentil Keep.

“Thank ye, Mystra,” Elminster murmured, hastily pulling on his boots. The goddess was, after all, why he had a deserted alley to dress in.

Right behind Fantharl Halamaun’s mansion, too.

He went round to the front as he cast a hasty spell to make his garments smarter and darker, to go with the younger and more prosperous face he was giving himself. After all, a messenger from Halamaun’s Sembian backers would either come through the Darkway, or seek entrance at the front doors.

The waylord’s guards were expecting trouble; two mountainous hulks in full armor overlooked by four crossbowmen who looked more than ready to fire.

“Emrayn Melkanthar, from Sembia, to see Fantharl Halamaun. Immediately,” Elminster made crisp reply to the guards’ challenge.

“The lord is not at home,” was the flat reply.

“I’ll await him in his forehall,” he responded, just as flatly.

“We are to admit no one—”

“You will make an exception, or your master will be far less than pleased.”

One of the crossbowmen vanished from the balcony above the doors, and returned with a handsome, richly dressed man with a styled and curved mustache.

“Valandro!” the Sembian greeted him, before the wizard could say a word. The Tethyrian frowned.

“I know you not, saer. Who are you, and how is it you know me?”

“I am Emrayn Melkanthar, and I am come from certain men in Sembia Halamaun does business with. Men who like to know with whom they deal—wherefore I was shown your likeness, and told you were Valandro the Mysterious these days, though I know you of old as—”

“Enough,” the Tethyrian said sharply. Drawing two wands from his belt, he leaned over the balcony rail, and said curtly to the guards below, “Let him in. I’ll be responsible.”

He hastened down to meet the Sembian, wands aimed and ready, but was seen to go quiet and fall into step beside Melkanthar, leading the Sembian away from the forehall and along passages toward the rear of the house.

When they reached the chamber that held Halamaun’s Darkway, Valandro the Mysterious dismissed the guards there, closed the doors to keep them out and himself and the Sembian in, then stood like an impassive statue as Melkanthar strode slowly around the glowing portal, nodded, and cast a swift, tentative spell. Only to frown and cast another.

“There,” he said aloud. “Manshoon’s enchantment now no longer transforms the blood of users, but instead works on their minds, promoting one of the most feeble spells they already know how to cast—and making it the *only* spell they can cast. Vulnerability, but not instant death. Aye, that should do it.”

He strode past the motionless and unseeing Valandro to the door, but was still reaching for its handle when it was flung wide, and four guards with leveled glaives thrust forward into the room, an angry Fantharl Halamaun right behind them.

“Die, foul Zhentarim!” the waylord snapped. “Not content to—”

“Hold!”

Magic lashed forth from the intruder with force enough to send Halamaun’s guards staggering back, dropped polearms clanging and clattering.

“No Zhentarim am I,” said the stranger. “I am of the Vigilant Ravens.”

Fantharl Halamaun blinked. The Ravens were a powerful Sembian cabal that opposed Manshoon’s rise to power, but he’d thought they’d not do anything beyond offering him bad prices and a chill welcome in Sembian markets.

“Your wizard Ardroth Thauntan died using your Darkway,” the Sembian continued, “because Manshoon cast a spell on it that turns the blood of anyone passing through it to acid. I’ve countered his spell; it is safe to use again.”

Halamaun glowered at the intruder, then nodded grudgingly. “I—I just heard from some fellow traders of their Darkways becoming deathtraps. You *know* Manshoon is behind this?”

The Sembian nodded. “By way of payment, Halamaun”—the builder stiffened, but the Sembian waved a contemptuous hand and continued—“suppose you tell me the name of one of Manshoon’s worst, ah, enforcers. The warriors he sends to do his open slayings. I feel in need of some . . . sport.”

Fantharl Halamaun drew his lips back from his teeth in a mirthless smile. “Ornthen Kelgoran. He won’t be hard to find—he fears no man of the city who isn’t his master Manshoon or an upperpriest of Bane.”

“That will change,” was the calm reply.

No knife nor spell tested Elminster’s wards as he stalked out of Halamaun’s house. He turned two street corners before he relinquished his hold over the mind of Valandro the Mysterious, leaving behind whirling confusion as to what Emrayn Melkanthar of Sembia had looked like.

Not that the Tethyrian would have much time to ponder. Unless Halamaun was far less scared than El had judged him to be, he would keep Valandro and his overdone mustache very busy spreading word to his fellow waylords of what Manshoon had done.

*

At the Drowning Hippocampus

In Zhentil Keep, richly dressed strangers attracted unhealthy attention in far safer drinking and wenching clubs than the noisome, dimly lit Drowning Hippocampus, so El altered his guise again, becoming a filthy, stooped old man in fittingly foul robes.

Besides, the Sembian’s coins had served their purpose, buying the news of Ornthen Kelgoran’s present whereabouts from several eager tongues. It seemed Kelgoran wasn’t well loved, or was well feared, or both. Probably both.

Now, the man would either be dominating the bar with goblet in hand and tongue a-wag, or abed somewhere with a lowcoin lass. Or two.

El shuffled through the doors, into near darkness and an all-too-familiar din and reek of spilled drink, unwashed bodies, spew, and burnt cabbage. Why all of these places had to smell of scorched cabbage was beyond him, but . . .

To the owner of the first hostile glare directed his way, El mumbled, “Urgent message for Kelgoran—where be he?”

“Rutting in the back,” was the reply. “Best wait for him to—”

El stumbled past, and down the hall his informant had nodded toward. At its very end he discovered a guard sitting against a door with a loaded crossbow across his knees.

That bow got aimed at his crotch with menacing speed. “Go away,” its owner suggested tersely.

“Message for Kelgoran from Lord Manshoon,” El growled back. “Still want me to go away?”

“How do I know you speak truth?”

“You’ll know,” El replied, thrusting his head forward, jaw first, “when Manshoon rewards you—either for helping me reach Kelgoran, or for being less than helpful.”

He let two dancing flames kindle in his eyes, just for a moment, and the guard recoiled with comical speed, swallowing and trying to claw his way upright and seeking to slide sideways along the wall and out of the way, all at once. “R-right the other side of the door, S-saer Zhent!” he offered breathlessly.

“Good,” Elminster replied with a gleeful grin—as he plucked up the crossbow to aim it back down the passage, and trigger it.

Its loud *clack* was followed by a groan from the Zhentarim enforcer back down the far end of the passage, as its bolt sank deep into his chest.

Then Elminster kicked the door open and whirled the door guard around in front of him as a shield in one whirling motion, his hand clamped like a steel trap on the bones of the man’s elbow.

The room beyond was almost filled by a bed. It was creaking as a cursing and very hairy man scrambled out from under a hissing-in-fear woman, reaching for his sword.

He stopped when El’s spell took hold of his mind.

Almost absently El flung the guard into the coinlass as she came at him furiously, her hands like claws. There’d be time enough to compel her mind later—and the guard’s, too, if need be.

Right now, he had something more urgent to do. His sudden arrival in the dark and raging cesspit of Ornthen Kelgoran’s mind had alerted Manshoon, just as he’d expected.

Smiling savagely, El destroyed the First Lord’s “eye” in Kelgoran’s mind, searing Manshoon’s magic

swiftly enough to leave its distant owner not knowing who’d burst into his enforcer’s mind, or why.

That should bring Manshoon out of whatever bed he was sporting in, right now, and set him to doing things that would add decidedly more fun to the unfolding proceedings.

The guard and the coinlass were still shrieking and tumbling on the floor when Ornthen Kelgoran burst past them, sword in hand but not bothering to snatch up and put on anything more than his boots, to hurry out into the streets with the strange old man.

The Zhentarim slayer was more than a little drunk, and was a cruel, unsubtle brute at the best of times, but he knew exactly where all of the waylords dwelt.

Under Elminster’s mental goading, he loped through the streets with a no-longer-stumbling old man right beside him, heading for the nearest Darkway just as fast as he could.

*

Guidance Gives Out

Elminster shuddered at the sudden burst of mental pain, then sighed. It was too late; Ornthen Kelgoran was toppling, almost beheaded, his mind dying with dazing speed.

Elminster broke contact and let the Zhentilar fall, spraying blood as his head wobbled loosely on what was left of a thick, hairy neck. Thrice he’d held Kelgoran unmoving at each Darkway, to keep the man helpless as he altered Manshoon’s slaying spell to his own.

This fourth time, the guards of Torlcastle Towers had been just a bit too swift and bold. He hadn’t even

begun the spell, yet here they were, with Kelgoran cut down and eight uniformed slayers charging at the one remaining intruder, howling all sorts of unpleasant things as their swords sought his life.

Elminster ducked away from one, almost collided with another who’d raced around to gut him from behind, and flung himself flat on his back. The startled Torlcastle guard stumbled over him, off-balance and trying unsuccessfully to stab downward with a sword that was too long to draw back far enough to stab, and ran right into the guard who’d been hounding El.

Lying on the smooth, polished, cold stone floor, Mystra’s man sighed and worked a spell that plucked all the guards off their heavy-booted feet and flung them at the ceiling high above.

They slammed into it with gratifyingly heavy thuds, swords and daggers fell from various hands—and then they all came crashing back down.

El stayed on his back amid the groans, knowing this wasn’t done yet. He had to prevail swiftly, or servants and guards from all over Torlcastle’s mansion would be in here, and readying crossbows, and he didn’t have *time* for all of this foolishness—

Four guards came swaying unsteadily to their feet after their journeys aloft and back again; one of them even still had hold of his sword.

Elminster rolled to his feet. “Keep back,” he warned them. “I have no quarrel with any of ye. Just let me be, and—”

He knew his words were wasted even before he said them, but Mystra expected her agents to wield their Art with some sense of responsibility. Four guards came charging—and a fifth was crawling toward a fallen weapon, giving El a murderous glare.

Elminster sighed, worked a simple spell, and watched as the closest guard got plucked to his death, hurled through the portal that would boil his life-blood into acid at its far end. Well, certain Sembians *did* need fair warning of all of this.

That bought him time enough to use another spell on the others to fling them away into battering collisions with the walls of the room. Then he threw one into another, and hauled the crawler up off the floor to crash into the faces of two reeling guards.

Everyone went down, buying him enough time to circle around behind the Darkway, to where he could keep an eye on them all, and work the spell he needed to cast.

Fresh shouts came from the doors of the room as the portal flared, but Elminster's next spell had snatched him away out of Torlcastle Towers even before the crossbow bolts came singing through the spot where he'd stood.

He was in a hurry. Manshoon would be roused and at work by now, and a certain servant of Mystra had to find another Zhentarim who knew where the rest of the Darkways were.

And as every wayfarer knows, good guides are *always* hard to find.

*

Sitting Alone in Highturrets

Morlar Elkauvren was a waylord, and lived in a towering pile of stone, a great rising prow of tall windows, balconies, and spires that would look most loomingly impressive against the winking stars, to someone who had time to stand in awe.

Elminster wasn't such a someone, just now. It was enough that he knew Elkauvren and the location of his home—Highturrets, an apt name if there ever was one—and that somewhere in that vast mansion was a Darkway.

And if he knew his Zhentarim, word would have spread among them by now that some stranger was tracking down Darkway after Darkway. They would be hunting for this stranger, and massing defenders around each portal to watch for his approach—or, for the Darkways they didn't yet control, around the mansions that held such portals.

Which was why Elminster now looked not like a bearded man, but a slender, rather dirty young woman clad in a hooded cloak, high boots, and not much else.

"Warm you, saer?" she husked hopefully, to the parade of dark-armored men striding swiftly down her alleyway.

One of them whirled, sword half-grating out. "Get gone, sister!" he barked. "Well away from here, and come not back, or it'll be the last thing you ever do!"

Her reply was to duck her head, hiss angrily, and—once the Zhentilar were past—scurry hastily out of the alcove she'd been loitering in and flee the way they'd come.

"Who's yon?" someone barked, from ahead.

"A streetskirts," another man replied. "They've turned her out; let her go."

El paused for a moment at the cross street where those two Zhents stood, and murmured fearfully, "Which one of you is the wizard?"

"Why?" the first Zhent snarled.

"F-for later," she quavered. "I was told to find him, another night, so I need to know what he looks like. Then I'll go."

Cold eyes measured her for a moment, ere the second Zhent turned and pointed. "There. He's called Cadathen. Likes redheads."

The coinlass shook back her hood and opened her cloak, flouncing just enough to make it swirl. Long, unbound red hair swirled, too, though the mens' eyes sought certain other revealed features.

"Thank you," she husked, before they could do more than grin, and hurried away. She didn't bother to tell them that her thanks were to Mystra, for the fact that the magic "she" was using could shift the hue of hair even faster than it took to pull open a garment.

She had to find a Zhent in armor about the same size as Ornthen Kelgoran, before the ring forming around Highturrets got completely settled. Ah—there!

"*You're* the one," she purred, throwing off her cloak to reveal her complete lack of weapons—and all her now-buxom charms—to the startled Zhentilar trudging along the street, his head down and his mood dark.

He gaped at her. "What, by all the gods—?"

"Take me," she hissed, whirling him into a doorway. "Here and now! I've been watching you for months, I'm crazed about you, I *must* have you! 'Twill take but moments, then give me your name, and I'll find you for longer dalliances on later nights! *Please*, my lord!"

Rather dazedly the Zhentilar ran a disbelieving hand down the warm, smooth flesh offered to him, then hurriedly started to unbuckle and unfasten. "Name's Vorl, lass! Watching me for months? Who are you?"

"Jahanna Darlwood, of the keep; my father's Brace Darlwood; seller of roof tiles and stone, and very wealthy . . ."

“Tell me later,” Vorl snarled, shoving her back against the wall as his breeches sought his ankles. “We must be quick!”

The suddenly melting mask of flesh that smothered him as he tried to kiss it retained a mouth. As he sagged into senselessness, it agreed in a very different voice, “Aye, we must. Sleep now, lusty Vorl. I’ll be tying ye to the door, I’m afraid; can’t have ye racing back to reclaim thy armor before I’m done with it.”

A few hard, swift breaths later, a man in a cloak was bound to the door—and his exact likeness was hurrying off down the street in full armor, head down and hand on his sword.

“Vorl, you laggard,” an older Zhentilar hailed him with a snarl, “where’ve you *been*? Rutting in doorways, all the way from the tavern?”

“Well, uh, yes,” Vorl admitted, but his low mumble was barley audible, and the Zhentilar wasn’t listening.

“Get over here, you lazy dog! We’re to form a ring all around Highturrets—and your reward for being last boots in is getting to stand guard right *there*, hard by the jakes!”

“There” was an embrasure in a building’s cracked and much-patched back wall, filled with rotting litter and containing a long-boarded-up door. It faced a matching alcove across the street, where a wooden bench with a hole in its seat had been placed over a large, square open shaft leading down into the infamous city sewers. Two unhappy-looking sternhelms were busy rigging up a blanket in a frame of spears, to serve as both a door and a wall for future patrons of the little seat, who might desire some privacy while they were sitting alone.

A jakes. It seemed the Zhentarim were expecting a lengthy siege.

Sternhelm Vorl growled a curse, because that would be expected, and trudged to his post, kicking aside the worst of the reeking, slimy refuse. He hoped he’d not have to wait long.

Mystra smiled on him; he’d barely had time to grow bored and cold ere the wizard Cadathen came in search of the jakes, blowing on chilled fingers and snarling some curses of his own.

If the Zhentarim mage was surprised that a Zhentilar sternhelm crossed the narrow street to hold the blanket open for him, he didn’t show it.

He was surprised when the warrior stepped into the alcove with him, pulling the blanket closed, but only for a moment.

After that, he had no time left to be surprised about anything, ever again.

*

As The Lord Mage Commands

“Cold, hey? Sitting alone over the sewers, I mean?”

Holding the rank of battlecaptain, Galandrор dared to exchange such pleasantries with Zhentarim mages. Well, he’d not do so with the Lord Manshoon, but Cadathen was very far from—

“Too cold,” the wizard said curtly. “We’re not waiting the night through out here. Storm the gates.”

Galandrор and his fellow battlecaptain, Narleth, exchanged surprised glances, then nodded in unison. “By your command, Lord Mage.”

Cadathen smiled and threw his shoulders back, like a pigeon about to preen. Obviously, he liked the sound of “Lord Mage.”

Narleth used the title again, quickly. “The front gates, Lord Mage?”

Cadathen shook his head. “The rear. I’ll destroy them with a spell, and the doors behind them too. You get our blades in there fast, secure the chamber that holds the Darkway, then drive out everyone in that end of the mansion. I want no one creeping up on us while I set to work on it.”

“Set to work on it, Lord Mage?” Galandrор asked warily. There’d been no hint of this in their orders, and Lord Manshoon wanted them to be watchful for traitors everywhere. Among his magelings, in particular.

Cadathen gave both battlecaptains calm, direct looks. “I suspect our unknown foe who’s seeking out Darkways is either hiding in them, or enspelling them to serve as scrying foci, so henceforth he can spy on the rooms that hold them, from afar. I need to cast a spell on the Darkway inside yon mansion, to see if my suspicions are correct. And all of us will have warmth, chairs to sit on, and whatever food and drink can be found in a waylord’s mansion, rather than freezing our behinds outside on a dark street all night.”

The Zhentilar nodded, reassured.

They collected their men swiftly, Narleth leading a dozen around the front to bang on the main gates and hold Elkavren’s guards there while Cadathen forced entry at the rear of the towering mansion.

“Right,” the wizard snarled, when Galandrор came striding back to tell him all was ready. “Let’s get warm.”

He raised his hands, murmured something, and the night exploded in fire.

*

Guarding Flickering Silence

“Secure, Lord Mage.” Galandrör’s tone was almost respectful.

Narleth had just returned and made his report. Only two Zhentilar had been killed, though Morlar Elkavren would need to replace most of his house guards and a goodly number of his household servants. The cowering lord was shut up in his own guestrooms above his front gate, with watchful stern-helms to keep him there—and not one member of Elkavren’s household was both still alive and nearer to the chamber that held the Darkway than the central feasting hall.

“Well done,” Cadathen replied, turning to the glowing portal. “Now to make sure this hasn’t been tainted by the foe’s magic.”

The two battlecaptains watched him closely, of course, but they were not to know that the spell he cast was doing no such thing, and instead was altering Manshoon’s slaying spell into his own less fatal magic—just as they were not to know Cadathen was really the infamous archwizard Elminster.

Suspicion was clear on their tense, grim faces, but they visibly relaxed as nothing seemed to happen. Other than Cadathen stepping back to nod in satisfaction and tell them, “Our foe worked a magic so he could spy through this, just as I suspected. He won’t be doing that now.”

When nothing more happened, the two warriors relaxed even more—and soon threw daggers to see who would first go foraging in the kitchens and pantries, and who would first settle down to the tense, waiting boredom of guarding the empty, silently flickering Darkway.

*

Whispers at the Feast

Though Manshoon knew the waylords were meeting in a high house not all that far away, he kept all hint of his knowing any such thing to himself.

Here, in this grand feasting hall, he was a guest of the most powerful nobles of the city, and was taking great care not to remind them of his ruthless side or the mighty magic he could hurl. Nobles tended to dislike upstarts who threatened them—particularly upstarts who could destroy them at will. His presence was all about reassurance, building alliances if not friendships, and making common cause.

Not to mention establishing a firm alibi for himself, for when word spread of all the waylords slain or embattled, and the survivors began to hurl their furious accusations.

Manshoon smiled and thanked his host for the excellent wine.

And why not? It held not even a trace of poison, after all.

His host, directly across the goblet- and platter-crowded table from him, was Lord Syal Amandon, the callow, bewildered-by-the-world son of Manshoon’s onetime nemesis, the thankfully dead old snow lion Rorst Amandon.

Syal was swiftly falling under his sway, and Manshoon was anxious to keep matters that way. The other nobles—particularly old Hael and Phandymm—knew exactly what he was up to, but had thus far done nothing about it. He saw the anger and contempt glittering in their gazes, but they continued to say and do not the smallest thing to cross the First Lord. Manshoon couldn’t read them—long-established wealth bought

wards and shieldings subtle spells couldn’t pierce—but looked forward to any opportunity to learn what they were truly thinking.

Hopefully one would arise before they were busily trying to put swords through him.

The three younglings were another matter. Lord Thaerun Blackryn, like Syal, was the pale shell of a more formidable sire. Young, hot-blooded, quick to boast, and cunning, he spent most of his hatred and energy trying to best and frustrate his rival, Lord Mindarl Naerh. Who did the same in return. Supercilious and swift-tongued, Naerh was a decade older than Blackryn—and every whit as ignorant of the world.

Belator, now, was a very different creature. As graspingly ambitious as Manshoon himself, and thus easily understood and used. With about as much safety as one “uses” a snake.

That left only Eldarr and his ilk; as old as Hael and Phandymm, but less keen of wit and far less self-governed. They were the arrogant, red-faced ranting, patrician sophisticates every minstrel lampooned, the sort of nose-aloft old growler that shopkeepers of the city thought all nobles were like. Which meant they could be ignored until it became necessary to crush them.

And Manshoon was growing adept at effortlessly crushing the Lord Murvyn Eldarrs of the world.

So it was with more than a little irritation—all signs of which were firmly kept off his face, for controlling his own face and voice were the first skills a far younger Manshoon had honed—that the First Lord of Zhentil Keep received an unexpected spell-sent message in his head.

F: first Lord?

The mind touch was wildly nervous and fearful. It was Joranthas, an aging Zhentarim too weak to be disloyal—and too weak to deal with much in the way of trouble. Which is what this missive would surely be about.

Lord Manshoon, I bring news. Joranthas was still frightened, but a little less frantic.

Yes? he thought back.

Ah, Lord, there's trouble at Wyrmhaven. I just . . . fled from there.

No doubt. Continue.

Ambram Sarbuckho returned from his meeting while our forces were still fighting his household servants to get to his Darkway. His bodyguards and hireswords had crossbows, and their quarrels were tipped with poison. Things went badly for our side.

Thank you, Joranthas. Get to cover.

Manshoon spent his flare of rage in a mental slap that both thrust Joranthas out of his mind and dealt the old fool a headache that should leave him reeling for days. He was icily calm a moment later, when he turned to beckon Snel from where the man stood like a servant against the wall.

"Forgive me, Lord Amandon," he said smoothly to his host, ignoring Lord Hael's glower of suspicion, "but I've just remembered that the servants who usually pump my water are ill; I must send my retainer to give orders to others to do their work, or the cook will have a dry kitchen long before morning."

"Of course," Syal said heartily, even before Snel bent his ear to Manshoon's lips.

He kept his whispers short and simple. "Trouble at Wyrmhaven; Sarbuckho's back, and his men have poisoned bows. Get Cadathen to crush them utterly. No excuses. Report back soon."

Snel bowed low and hastened away, and Manshoon turned back to the table with an easy smile.

He wasn't smiling inside. Cadathen had to be victorious, or the Zhentarim would lose far too many minor magelings at Wyrmhaven—if they weren't dead already. More importantly, he dared not let Sarbuckho prevail, and become a clear example of successfully defying the Brotherhood. If the waylord won the night's fray, his victory would hearten many others into their own rebellions against the Zhentarim, large and small.

He ached to be racing to Wyrmhaven himself, to hurl spells to smash and rend Sarbuckho and his every last blade and servant—and instead he was stuck here, wearing an empty smile, and taking great care to use no magic at all over eveningfeast. Well, almost no magic.

Lord Belomyr Hael was starting to smile. Bane take Mystra, but the old wolf could scent his discomfort!

Hael was old, graying and growling, a worldly conservative—and right beside him, grandly adorned elbow to grandly adorned elbow, Lord Goraund Phandymm was an even older worldly and pragmatic conservative.

They were both smiling now, almost as if they could read his mind.

Could they?

But no, he'd worked spells a hundred times to check on that. They were just good at reading the smallest signs—tightness of lip, the briefest flash of an eye—but toothless old wolves for all that.

Down the table, Lord Samrel Belator helped himself to a decanter that was already almost empty. Now there was a contrast: young, handsome, athletic, an embracer of new ways and ideas . . . Manshoon's real competition.

Well, such perils could be humbled—or killed—tomorrow.

Tonight, he needed an alibi rather more.

Manshoon put on his best innocent smile, reached for the nearest decanter, and devoted himself to making empty small talk.

Cadathen would take care of things.

Cadathen would have to.

*

Orders Upon Orders

The man came through the curtains very quietly, but the two battlecaptains spun around, swords flashing.

"Halt!" Galandror barked, drawing his dagger and hefting it for a throw. Narleth came around the Darkway to flank his fellow Zhentilar, barring the intruder's path to the portal, and to Cadathen.

Then they recognized him and fell silent.

"I bring orders from the Lord Manshoon," Lorkus Snel said, with just a trace of weariness. "Hinder me and face his wrath."

The battlecaptains lowered their swords a little.

"Cadathen," Snel said, "you are ordered to gather all of the Brotherhood's forces you feel you need, proceed in haste to Wyrmhaven, the house of the Waylord Ambram Sarbuckho, and slay everyone there who resists you to take possession of the Darkway. Sarbuckho returned from Harlstrand House while our force was still fighting through the halls of Wyrmhaven, and his bodyguards used poisoned crossbow bolts; our force is all dead or fled."

"Take me there," Cadathen replied promptly, "so you can tell the master what decisions I make, and how I fare."

“How you begin, rather,” Sneel corrected him. “My orders are to report back to the master soonest.”

“Very well.” Cadathen fell into step beside him, calling back over his shoulder, “Battlecaptains, remain here and guard this Darkway!”

Even before they replied, he was through the curtain with Sneel, and hastening through the empty, echoing mansion, heading for Wyrmhaven.

*

Rally and Betrayal

The handful of blood-spattered, wounded Zhentilar crouching in the cold alleyway were in pain, and angry. They snarled out a stream of curses as they told Cadathen they had fled for their lives, or been driven out of Wyrmhaven, leaving many fellow members of the Brotherhood dead inside. Ambram Sarbuckho was victorious.

Cadathen put his arms around two of the least disabled, gathered them to him, and whispered, “And you know *why* Sarbuckho defeated you? He was warned of your coming by the man who came here with me. Yes, Lorkus Sneel, the master’s messenger. He betrayed you. He betrayed us all.” He let go of them and strode off down the alley to find more Zhents.

Sneel strode after him—and Cadathen carefully didn’t look back as a brief commotion arose behind him, a thudding and snarling that ended in a wet spattering sound.

When he did turn around, the two Zhentilar were following him, their swords dripping in their hands . . . and the huddled heap that had been Sneel lay still in the midst of a spreading pool of dark blood, in their wake.

Justice, mistaken or otherwise, was at least prompt in Zhentil Keep.

Smiling tightly, Cadathen beckoned the two men to him, as he came upon another knot of wounded Zhents. “Would you like to avoid the Lord Manshoon’s wrath, and claim Sarbuckho’s head before morning?”

There was a general murmur of assent. “What if I take myself into the forehall ahead of you, take down Sarbuckho’s bowmen with my spells, then blast the doors open from inside to let you in? Will you be ready to charge into Wyrmhaven to finish the fray?”

“I’ll say!” one Zhentilar replied.

“We’re dead if we don’t,” an older one growled. “None of us can run and hide to where the First Lord can’t find us.”

That brought a general rumble of agreement, as more Zhents came trotting up to join the throng around Cadathen.

“Right, then,” the wizard told them excitedly. “Charge the doors, after I bring them down. Until then, keep back.”

He made two swift, complex gestures—and was abruptly gone, the space where he’d stood simply empty.

*

War in Wyrmhaven

Elminster crouched low, the moment he felt the stones of the balcony beneath his feet. Being Cadathen was a bit of a strain; thankfully, he’d soon be done playing ambitious young Zhentarim.

Right after he turned, keeping below the balcony sidewall so the Zhentilar below wouldn’t see him, he

made the door that led into Wyrmhaven’s fourth floor quietly melt out of existence. Then he hurried across the dark, deserted room beyond. The cold night air followed him.

From all he knew of Ambram Sarbuckho, alert warriors with crossbows would be massed in the forehall and every other room that had an exterior door. Zhentish mansions sported no ground-floor windows, so defenders could concentrate where they were most likely to be needed.

Sarbuckho was a swindler from way back, and Elminster felt no compunction at all about blasting down men who fought for him.

So all he needed to do was get to the top of the great corkscrew staircase that spiraled down into the rear of the forehall, work a quiet spell, and stand well back.

As the floor heaved and shuddered, Wyrmhaven thundered and groaned all around him, a blinding flash flung a thick haze of smoke and dust into the air, and a rising roar from many Zhentilar throats told him he’d not only shattered the forehall and its defenders—he’d burst open its doors, letting them flood in.

Smiling, he waited until he thought the moment just right, and cast another blasting spell down the ruined stair, to claim Manshoon’s men, this time. Then he turned and strode along the hallway, seeking a servants’ stair down. He needed to get to Sarbuckho’s gate and alter it, without greeting a poisoned quarrel.

In the eddying aftermath of his magics, he could feel the mounting pulse of the Darkway as he got closer to it. Thankfully, it stood unguarded, all of Wyrmhaven’s guards gone elsewhere to fight the attackers.

He did what he had to do with swift ease, and teleported himself back to the alley. It was deserted, though a timid coinlass poked her head out a door to see if it was safe to emerge and seek business. At the sight of a Zhentarim mage, she hastily ducked back again.

El smiled thinly and started a careful circumnavigation of the embattled mansion, to make sure no Zhentilar got away. There should still be some poisoned quarrels left, if he knew his waylords . . .

Above all, he wanted no witnesses to tell tales about Cadathen or Snel that would reach the ears of a certain First Lord of Zhentil Keep.

Neither his first circuit nor his second turned up anyone fleeing Wyrmhaven, where ragged shouts and the clash and clang of arms told him the fighting was still raging.

That much vigilance would have to be sufficient. There were other things he wanted to do that night.

El stopped at Snel's body, turned it over, and looked around to make sure no one was watching. Then he conjured a little light to see by and carefully shifted his own likeness to match the unlovely looks of Lorkus Snel.

Dragging what was left of the real Snel to the jakes he'd earlier thrust Cadathen's body down, he tipped Manshoon's best spy down into the sewers.

The eels would soon devour it, beneath the reeking waters and drifting filth, and—

His eyes narrowed. Instead of the wet, sloppy splash he should have heard, there'd been a distinct *thud*. Hurriedly he conjured light again and looked down.

Bobbing in the waters below was a dead man, face up and palely staring, several threads of red gore trailing from him into the waters around. It wasn't Snel, nor Cadathen for that matter.

It was Ambram Sarbuckho.

Elminster blinked. *That fast, they'd got to him? Or was the Sarbuckho who'd come storming "back" to Wyrmhaven not the real Sarbuckho at all?*

For a moment he contemplated just waving this mystery away and getting on with the business of undoing Manshoon's evil just as swiftly as he could. Then he sighed, waved that thought away instead, and teleported himself back to a certain balcony.

The room it opened into was as dark and deserted as before. Cautiously he stepped out into the hallway beyond. No guards, no one lurking with a crossbow . . .

Here deep in Wyrmhaven, things had quieted down. A lot of the shouters and sword-clangers had, it seemed, perished, and the survivors were running out of foes to loudly fight with.

Up on this high floor there were no signs of life—or any evidence that the fighting had ever reached this far.

El stood against a wall like a thoughtful statue for a breath or two, pondering. If he had been Ambram Sarbuckho, where would his grand personal bed-chamber be?

High in the mansion, probably on this floor—for the levels above must be smaller expanses, broken by the separations of turrets and towers rising apart, and it seemed only wizards preferred such smaller, rounded privacies—and most likely toward the back of Wyrmhaven.

In other words, right this way . . .

As he went, El turned one of the rings he wore, to call up a protective mantle that would make him like smoke to metal weapons, and turn back many magics too. He moved along the hall as quietly as he knew how.

It made a right-angled turn, to meet with the end of a parallel hallway running down the other side of the main bulk of the mansion—and in the center of that cross passage was an alcove, whose back wall was a pair of high, rounded, ornate doors.

Trapped and guarded or not, they were what he'd been seeking. On the far side of them . . .

He drew off Snel's boots, thrust his hands into them, and took a door handle between them, turning it. Locked, of course.

As he let the handle quietly return to its former position, he heard something he'd been expecting: faint feminine sobbing from the far side of the door.

Stepping smoothly to one side of the doors, he asked firmly, "Lady? Lady Sarbuckho? Are you in need of aid?"

The sobbing caught in a great gasping of breath and sniffing, then became a choked and tremulous voice replying in the negative—and furiously ordering him away.

Elminster frowned. Making no reply, he moved along the passage to its far corner, where he found what he'd hoped there would be there: a much smaller, plainer closed door.

It was locked, too, but a swift spell seared through it, leaving the lock holding a half-moon of door separate from the larger rest of it. El gently pushed that larger panel open and stepped inside, finding himself in a dark robing room lined with wardrobes. The weeping was louder now, coming from a gap in the wardrobes along the side wall, where a curtained archway obviously led into the main bedchamber.

Elminster peered through the gap where the two curtains met, satisfied himself that there was only one person—hunched over on the floor at the

foot of a gigantic canopied bed, and trembling—in the room beyond, and glided soundlessly through the curtains.

His first act was to kick away the bloody knife in front of the sobbing woman, his second to do the same to a black gem the size of his palm that positively *crawled* with magic, and his third was to kneel swiftly and take her by the arms.

She raised a tear-streaming, bleeding face of misery to him, staring in fear. “S-sneel? *Here?*”

“No, I merely wear his shape. I’m not of the keep, Lady. *Ye are* Lady Sarbuckho, are ye not?”

She nodded, drawing her head up but spoiling the proud movement by sniffing like a young lass getting over a tantrum. “Yavarla Sarbuckho I am, saer. Are you here to kill me for what I’ve done—or for my jewels, or for who I am?”

“I’m not here to slay ye at all. But tell me now, what have ye done?”

By way of reply, she shook her head and looked away, trying to jerk free of his grasp.

“Ye sent your lord husband down dead into the sewers, did ye not? Using yon knife, aye?”

Yavarla Sarbuckho went rigid in his arms, then sagged limply and whispered, “Y-yes.”

“Why?” El asked, as softly as any comforting mother, gathering her against his chest.

She burst into fresh tears, in a flood of uncontrolled weeping, and struggled incoherently to say something through it. Elminster daubed at the blood on her face—one eye was swollen almost shut, and she might have a rather piratical scar down the line of her chin, if she lived long enough for things to heal—and murmured wordless comfort, rocking her like a child.

Eventually words came to her. “He-he—he burst in on me, in a rage . . . beat me! He’d learned . . . what I’d done!”

“And what have ye done?” El murmured into her ear, holding her tight.

Yavarla drew in one shuddering breath, and then another, fighting for control. “L-lord Manshoon came to me . . . alone. He was very kind, comforting, the very sort of lord I wanted—ohhh, kind gods deliver me!”

She burst into tears again, sobbing wretchedly, and Elminster rocked her and murmured, “Ye and the First Lord lay together, and he was kind and understanding and tender, and ye talked. He asked questions, like a kindly friend, and ye answered them, and he learned much about the Darkways, and Lord Sarbuckho’s dealings in Sembia, whom he traded with, and who else in the city used their Darkways in like manner . . . am I right?”

She managed a nod as she shuddered her way through hard breathing again, fighting her way out of weeping once more.

“Just now, thy lord husband burst in on ye in a rage, and tried to force ye to—what?”

“G-go straight to Manshoon, and touch him with the gem.”

“Did he say what would befall then?”

“N-no. I knew. We both knew. He got it years ago from adventurers who plundered a Netherese tomb. When awakened, you touch it to the one you named when awakening it, and it will explode.”

“With force enough to turn Manshoon—and ye—and probably most of whatever tall keep ye’re standing in—to dust.”

“Y-yes. It’s awake now.”

“So ye both knew he was sending ye to death. Ye refused, and he beat ye, and ye snatched out his own belt dagger and stabbed him . . . and he died. So ye stuffed him down yon garderobe.”

“I did.” Yavarla was past tears now. She stared at him almost defiantly. “And I regret it not at all. I have hated him for a very long time.”

Elminster nodded. “With good cause, I have no doubt. Come; time is running out for us both.” He pointed at the robing room he’d come through. “Choose thy two most favorite coverings—everything, from toes to top of head, mind; gems and underthings, main garments, and the cloaks and wraps ye wear when stepping out into snowstorms—and thy least favorite wear; three entire outfits. Bring it all in and toss it on thy bed. Be swift and quiet, and run right back in here if anyone sees ye through the ruin I made of thy robing room door. Do *not* flee out into the house beyond, or ye’ll surely be slain. Brutally, by Zhentarim who have invaded thy halls, not by me.”

Yavarla stared at him for a moment, then rushed into the robing room. Elminster went straight to the gem and sent it somewhere far away and safer. Then he plucked up the dagger, wiped it on a white fur rug that was already spattered with much of Ambram Sarbuckho’s spilled blood, then kept the dagger and sent the rug on the same journey that the Lord of Wyrmhaven had recently made.

By then, Yavarla was done, and standing anxiously by the bed.

“Find thy most precious jewels, and all coins ye can lay hand on, that are in this room,” El told her.

She held up a small coffer already in her hands. “No-no coins would he allow me, and his are locked in vaults down below, not here.”

El nodded and waved at her to drop the coffer on the bed with the rest. She did, and he gathered up the thick coverlet, with its glossy shimmerweave skin around overlapped and sewn-together thick wool blankets, around all she'd gathered. The bundle was nearly as large as she was.

"Fight me not, now," he murmured, settling the bundle on one hip and sliding his other hand around her waist. "Hold very still."

She obeyed, and that gave his hands freedom enough to work a teleport spell, and whisk them both to an alley that was becoming all too familiar.

*

We All Wear the Masks We Need

El looked up and down the gloomy alleyway. Seeing no one, he swiftly spread his bundle out on the filthy stones underfoot, in a spot where a shaft of moonlight fell fair upon it.

"Stand on that, strip, and get dressed in thy best," he ordered, hurriedly unfastening his own garments.

Yavarla was trembling as she stared at him, eyes large with mounting fear. "What—who *are* you?" she whispered.

"A friend," Elminster replied, his face and body melting and shifting under her stare, Sneel's rippling garments falling away or hanging limply.

Yavarla fought back a scream. A moment later, she stared at a woman of very much the same size and build as herself, a rather plain woman she'd never seen before.

"Is . . . is this . . . am I seeing who you really are?" she blurted out.

"Nay," the unfamiliar woman told her flatly. "We all wear the masks we need."

At that moment, Yavarla felt her own flesh beginning to creep and crawl . . .

She did scream and try to flee, then, but deft hands whirled her around, carried her back to the midst of the moonlight, and tripped her.

She landed hard on her knees, grunted in fresh pain, then shivered. It was *cold*, out here in the night . . .

"Hurry," her rescuer—captor?—said in her ear. "I'll help; what need ye first? Clout? Dethma?"

Feeling dazed, Yavarla gave in, getting dressed in greater haste than she had for many a year. She scarcely noticed that whenever she made a choice of garment, the woman—or was he really a man, as he'd first appeared?—donned one of the two like garments she'd not chosen. It was all done in panting haste, and she'd barely gained steady breath before she was fully dressed, cloak and all, and being towed firmly by the hand along the alley by her strange escort, who now carried a rather smaller bundle.

They came out into a street, and turned right. Despite it being deep night, quite a few quiet, furtive folk were walking purposefully along, hands on weapon hilts, or meeting side by side with their backs to a building wall, where they could look this way and that while they muttered whatever business they were transacting. A few cloaked and hooded women silently parted their cloaks to show bare leg or hip at their approach, but made no reaction when they hastened on past.

The noblewoman shuddered, perhaps wondering if her future included becoming a desperate streetskirt. Elminster gave her no time to ponder; the lamps of the inn he sought were only a block away.

He tugged her close for a moment, to murmur in her ear, "For now, ye are *not* Lady Sarbuckho. In fact, Yavarla, ye have forgotten how to speak at all."

She made no reply, but went meekly with him and stood hooded and silent as the unlovely woman her escort had become briskly took a room for them both, snapping that they'd been forced to flee the place they'd been staying after it was "invaded by men fighting each other, with wizards and spells, too!"

They were behind a locked door and inside a warding spell stronger than any she'd ever seen cast before ere Yavarla caught sight of a mirror—and caught her breath, feeling herself on the verge of tears again. The face staring red-eyed back at her in the feeble light of the lone lamp was not hers.

"You have stolen my very self from me," she gasped.

"Only for now," the woman murmured from behind her, taking her under the arms as if to keep her from falling. "Sleep now, Yavarla."

And Yavarla fell down a great dark shaft into an endless rushing abyss of hatefully shouting, then gasping in pain and horror Ambrams, a plunge from which there was no escape . . . ever . . .

*

New Lives, and Strangers to go with Them

When Yavarla came awake, the light flooding through the filthy window told her it was near highsun, and she was lying in an inn bed answering questions. Whispering long, detailed, involved answers about every Darkway she knew of, and their owners, the names of the high houses that held those gates, and the names and whereabouts within the mansion walls of the chambers that

held the flickering portals. Not that she knew much, but she heard herself eagerly spilling forth every hint and rumor and scrap of half-heard possible truth she remembered, and far more than she ever knew she'd remembered.

"You—you are using me," she gasped then, coming fully awake and staring up into the eyes of . . . yet another stranger.

A bearded man whose eyes were sometimes as blue as a clear day's sky, and at other times as silver-gray as a sword drawn in a fog, and most of the time somewhere in between.

"Aye, I am," he replied gravely, "for it is needful. In return, I offer ye a new life, far from cold Zhentil Keep and its cruel lords and crueler wizards. Somewhere will ye'll never have to face death for slaying thy husband, or feel the sting of Manshoon's betrayal—before that betrayal kills thee."

"I . . . I—" Something welled up in Yavarla then and burst out of her, leaving her weeping as she thrust herself up and bawled at him, "No! *Never!* I am of the keep, this is my *home*, this is—Manshoon will never—"

Even as she said it, she knew otherwise. That cold and gently smiling man would break her in an instant if she stood in the way of his most idle whim. He had used her already, far worse than this man she did not know had used her, and—and—

Tears overwhelmed her again, and she covered her face with her hands and fought to cling to herself through them, fought until rage made her beat her fists on the bed sightlessly and cry, "I know how to do *more* than weep, damn all Watching Gods, I *do!*"

"Easy, lass," the man murmured, touching her cheek gently. The pain that had been there since Ambram's ring had laid it open vanished, and so did her grief, under a vast wave of weariness followed

by lighthearted cheer, a euphoria that came out of nowhere with the scent of lemons and vague visions of green trees and dappled sunlight and laughter . . .

"Magic," she said calmly. "You're using magic on me."

"I am. I want ye calm, Yavarla, and happy. Clear-headed to choose."

Yavarla drew in a deep, tremulous breath and said firmly, "I am calm. I can choose. And unless you intend to be my jailor, I tell you again: Zhentil Keep is my home. I want no new life far from here. I know full well how dangerous it will be, I know I love the First Lord and he loves me not . . . but I wish to stay. Even if it means my death, I am of the keep."

"So be it. Ye shall stay. Or rather, return to Wyrmhaven—if there's still a Wyrmhaven to return to—in a day or two, after I'm done causing a storm that may well sweep ye away, if ye are not kept safe. Think of this, then, as a vacation."

The light around Yavarla changed, and the bed beneath her became the cold flagstones of a stone floor somewhere in a forest under the open sky, with great old trees looming in a ring around her and stretching off into vast green distances beyond. The bundle of her shimmerweave coverlet lay on her shins, and a tall, beautiful, silver-haired woman was laying aside a harp to rise from rocks and bend over Yavarla in pleasantly surprised greeting. She wore foresters' leathers, and had none of the wrinkles of age that should go with silver tresses.

"Well met, Lady. I am Storm Silverhand, the kettle is just boiling, and there will be hot buttered biscuits very soon. Will you take tea?"

Which was when Yavarla discovered she was ravenous.

As she tried to smile and find words of answer, the woman bending over her was hearing other words in her own head.

Storm, this is Yavarla Sarbuckho, of Zhentil Keep. She just slew her husband, with good reason. Give her gentle slumber with thy spells and herbs, and keep her that way for this day and mayhap the next.

Storm smiled, inside her head. *Of course, El. If you decide what to do next for once, rather than just rushing out and doing it.*

Fair enough, Stormy One. Fair enough.

And it was. Moreover, the biscuits were delicious.

*

Done by Next Highsun

Thus far, this highsunfeast had gone better than he'd expected. Fzoul Chembryl's eyes told Manshoon clearly how furious the priest of Bane still was over Manshoon's seizing of power, but the First Lord's guest had obviously decided to be civil. For now, at least.

"I've never had any intention of deciding everything, and ruling the Brotherhood," Manshoon said carefully. "I want you to be—*need* you to be—a full partner in all decisions. So we are met not just to gorge ourselves on this superb cheese and harberry jelly—pray have more, won't you?—but to decide how to proceed next."

"In all matters of governance over the keep and the Zhentarim?" Fzoul asked calmly. "Or just in your—pardon me, *our*—war upon the waylords?"

"All, of course, but let us leave those decisions to later meetings, which I agree to hold at your behest and not mine, when this matter of the waylords is

done with. First upon our mutual platter: Sarbuckho, and his defeat of our men at Wyrmhaven.”

“You lost more than a dozen wizards, I’ve heard,” Fzoul commented to the cheese he was slicing. “Let us begin by your trusting me enough to unfold clear truth about all of our losses. How many mages—and just how many warriors and spies can we add to that?”

“Ten and four wizards,” Manshoon said quietly. “Five of accomplishment, the rest ambitious mage-lings or aging hedge wizards. Three or four spies—I’m still waiting for a certain man to report back to me. Almost twoscore warriors; the total depends on whether or not some recover. Sarbuckho’s men used poisoned quarrels.”

“Lorkus Sneel being that certain man?”

Manshoon nodded. “Do you know something of his fate?”

Fzoul shook his head. “Nothing. Truly. Well, I am for the utter destruction of Sarbuckho *and* his mansion. Present an example to anyone else contemplating any sort of challenge or resistance to the Brotherhood. Muster all we have for a very public assault in which Wyrmhaven is dashed to rubble. We hurl all our keep-shattering spells, and leave all loyal citizens thinking.”

Manshoon’s sudden smile was as bright as it was genuine. This was precisely what he’d been planning to do, priests or no priests. He liked the entire might of the temple behind it far better than otherwise.

They swiftly and easily agreed that Wyrmhaven’s fall should be accomplished “by next highsun.” Fzoul offered to set his upperpriests on rooftops to smite armymen sent out to fight the Zhentilar—as well as any of the pitiful remnants of the city watch

unwise enough to presume to challenge the authority of the Zhentarim.

It took but a few words back and forth for them to further agree to then sit back and wait for the cowed surviving waylords to suffer the effects of their portals becoming deathtraps. They would, of course, destroy any independent wizards who approached any waylord mansion, not wanting the waylords to be able to hire anyone who might be able to make the Darkways safe again.

“The waylords will fall, we’ll rebuild the watch as ours, outright, and the council can meet as often as they like and say whatever they like,” Fzoul gloated, over his sixth flagon of wine. “Zhentil Keep will be ours.”

He was gratified by Manshoon’s eager smile, and they clinked flagons together.

Fzoul Chembryl was enjoying this.

For this first time in far too many days, Manshoon really needed him.

Which meant no sly or savage attack would fall on him, here or elsewhere, for days to come.

More than that, the ever-mounting death toll among the Brotherhood mage-lings would give the Rightful Hand of Bane real say in the Zhentarim for some time to come; Manshoon was fast becoming one man, standing almost alone against all the might of the temple.

Alone indeed. Last night a beholder had come floating into Fzoul’s private chapel, turning aside the guardian spells with contemptuous ease, to hiss a private message.

“Expect Manshoon to receive no aid from any of my kind in this fray over the Darkways,” the eye tyrant had said. “We regard this as a test of Manshoon’s strength and fitness to lead the

Brotherhood. So fear not, Fzoul Chembryl—if Manshoon calls on us to crush you or your temple underlings, we shall not hear.”

*

A Spell of Simple Remedy

“Keep back!” Elminster snapped, as guards pounded up, glaives lowered and reaching for him. “I’m undoing Manshoon’s evil, so all can safely use this Darkway again. Harm me, and you doom him, and all your livelihoods.”

“Back, men!” a deeper voice rolled out, from behind the guards. “Who are you, wizard?”

“Elminster,” the bearded wizard replied—as the floor rocked under their feet, and distant thunder made glass lamps tinkle and the entire mansion shudder around them.

“What’s going on?” the waylord demanded. “That’s been happening most of the day, now!”

“Ambram Sarbuckho killed many Zhentarim last night. Manshoon is now busily destroying Wyrmhaven as a warning to all the rest of you.”

“Meaning?”

El shrugged. “He intends to crush all who don’t kneel to him. So, some of ye may elect to use thy gates to flee the keep, with all thy riches and retainers. Yet ye’re Zhents, so most of ye will probably vow to fight Manshoon to the death. Me, I must use the time while Manshoon’s indulging himself at Wyrmhaven to undo the fatal spells he worked on every last Darkway, to make them all safe again. So I’m off to the next one now. Lord, ye have a decision to make.”

*

A Warm Welcome

Yavarla swam up out of a pleasant slumber to find the sun warm on her face, and herself snugly wrapped up in her own shimmerweave coverlet. Storm had put her coffer in her hands and produced a soft pillow from somewhere to cradle her head. Yavarla could hear the beautiful, liquid swirling of her harp from off to her right, not too close, and smiled to herself.

She did not let that smile reach her face. Nor did she open her eyes.

This was all very pleasant, but it was a trap.

The man who'd snatched her out of Wyrmhaven last night was keeping her here, away from the keep, for reasons of his own.

She had to get back—to Manshoon—before any more time passed.

If this silver-haired harpist hadn't robbed her as she slept, she had the means to do it, too. Under the coverlet, Yavarla opened the coffer a crack with her thumbs, feeling carefully for the ring with the sculpted wing thrusting up from it.

There it was, amid everything else. Her wealth was untouched.

The harp music swirled, rising and falling. Storm Silverhand was strolling around the glade as she played.

Eyes shut, Yavarla worked to get that ring on her finger. She knew what she'd see if she looked over at the harpist. Those long, long silver tresses would be swirling and coiling like lazy snakes or stretching cats, curling leisurely in time to the music. The harpist's magic must be strong—so she, Yavarla, would have to be fast.

There! It was on, and snuggled up against her knuckles. Close the coffer, think of the street in front of Manshoon's house, for it would be foolish to try to teleport into a wizard's home, with all the wards he'd have, and—

—Faerûn whirled around her—

—she was blinking in the bright sun of the keep, standing on the cobbles outside Manshoon's gates, her coffer in her hands. Grim guards were already lowering great glaives to menace her.

"I," she told them calmly, "am expected. Conduct me to First Lord Manshoon. Without delay, if you please."

The nearest guard inclined his head. "Lady, your name?"

"I am Lady Yavarla Sarbuckho. Wife to the Lord Ambram Sarbuckho, of the keep."

"Admit her," a young wizard's voice called down from somewhere above, and the great gates opened.

Yavarla kept a serene smile on her face as she was whisked up stairs and across polished marble halls and up more stairs, climbing ever higher. Twice her skin tingled, the ring on her finger burning her like fire, as unseen spellcasters probed her for magic. The second time, a man she'd never seen before stepped out of a door to bar her way and demand, "Remove your ring. No such magic in the presence of the First Lord."

"You," she replied coolly, "are not the First Lord. I have seen him—all of him—and I know."

Unimpressed, the man reached out for her coffer. After a moment, she put it into his hand.

"This shall be returned, unopened by me," he told her, his other hand still out. "The ring."

Silence fell between them, until she sighed, removed the ring, and dropped it into his palm. He

bowed, indicated the door he'd come through, and glided away, murmuring, "Lord Manshoon awaits you."

Yavarla opened the door. The room beyond was a richly paneled study full of books and a massive table and highbacked chairs, like many she'd seen in the mansions of the mighty. Standing by the table was—her heart leaped anew at his dark, handsome looks, and the smile growing on his face—Manshoon.

"Lord, I came to tell you my husband is dead. I killed him last night, after he came to me wanting me to slay you. He—"

"Yavarla," Manshoon said warmly, opening his arms to welcome her.

As she rushed into them, fire kindled in his eyes.

With that same widening smile still on his face, he drawled, "Your usefulness is past."

Fire coalesced out of the air around her, binding her like chains—and then started to sear her.

"And you bore me," he added, as she tried to scream . . . and fell to ashes, instead.

His second spell kept even the smallest of them from reaching the carpet.

From a chair on the far side of the table, Fzoul Chembryl watched as the ashes roiled, then spiraled in the air like dark water going down a drain, and vanished.

Then he nodded approvingly.

A ruler free of entanglements is a leader free of weaknesses. He'd do the same thing.

He smiled crookedly, thinking of certain rather eager priestesses back at the temple. He might soon have to.

*

The Time of Reckoning

At least this, Elminster thought rather wearily, was the last.

He'd told a seemingly endless succession of angry waylords what he was doing to their Darkways, and why—and now here he was in the luxurious black marble rear hall of Swordgates, looking up into the frightened face of Mantras Jhoszelbur . . . and he was done at last.

He straightened with a yawn, dusted his hands together, and told this last waylord, "I'm done here. If ye'd be rid of First Lord Manshoon, hounding him out of the keep is thy work to undertake. If ye prefer a life of slavery, let him proceed down the path he's chosen, and ye'll enjoy that status soon enough!"

Before Jhoszelbur could think of something suitably testy to snarl, El was through an archway and back along the passage that led to the rear door he'd come in by. He wanted to get clear of Swordgates before Manshoon finished destroying Wyrmhaven and came looking for other foes to reduce to rubble.

Guards scuttled hastily out of his way. El gave them a reassuring smile—no sense in having a few spears hurled at the back of your head, even if you did have a mantle to stop them—and then opened that door and ducked out into the alley beyond.

And the world exploded.

When he could see again, he knew what had happened. His mantle had returned half a dozen hostile magics to the various Zhentarim who'd first hurled them, then failed, overloaded by the onslaught.

Those backlashes were still causing various buildings where Manshoon's mages had been to slump or topple, up and down the alley—and the flood of still-rolling rubble had just swept him right back into Swordgates.

Thankfully, Jhoszelbur's guards were fleeing in all directions, not throwing spears, and there was no sign of any of the Stormwands.

Elminster fought his way free of all the stone—and then stiffened, as Mystra spoke briefly and firmly in his head.

Not that way, El. 'Tis time to teach Manshoon a lesson.

He sighed, looked longingly at the last Darkway he'd altered, then murmured, "As ye wish, Great Lady of Mysteries," and started walking briskly through Stormgates.

He strode the length of that sprawling, many-pillared stone mansion, raising a new mantle around himself as he went, to the front doors of Swordgates.

Jhoszelbur's house guards threw them wide at his approach, and Elminster strode out into the sunlight—and the welcome he'd been expecting.

Zhentilar javelins cracked and shattered on the descending flight of steps in front of his boots, and behind the massed black-armored horde of warriors happily hurling them, El saw baneguards advancing, upperpriests of Bane commanding them. More priests stood on roofs and balconies all around, and there were Zhentarim, too, some of them in the saddles of foulwings flapping and circling overhead like great black bat-winged toads.

The triple-jawed aerial steeds of the Brotherhood croaked and hissed harsh unpleasantnesses to each other, their red eyes burning, eager to enter the fray.

Swordgates occupied a corner where two streets met, and similarly grand mansions lined both of those routes—high houses whose streetfront windows and balconies were crowded with priestesses of Loviatar, presumably aiding the Brotherhood to gain Manshoon's favor.

Manshoon? Ah, *there* he was, standing with Fzoul Chembryl on a high mansion balcony right across the road, ready to gloat as the lone wizard on the steps got destroyed.

The Rightful Hand of Bane held two dark rods in his hands, and Manshoon hadn't forgotten to bring a long, fell-looking staff.

"Oh, *dung*," Elminster said sourly, clawing in a pouch for his least useful enchanted rings, so as to feed his mantle with *something*. This was going to hurt.

"Care, lords, I beg of you!" the owner of the mansion whose balcony Manshoon and Fzoul were standing on shouted then, from the room behind them. "If much magic is unleashed here, the destruction will be *ruinous*! Zhentil Keep's fairest houses could well be—"

Manshoon lifted one hand and made a lazy signal, without even bothering to turn around. The wealthy merchant gurgled in midprotest as his throat was slit, the ugly sound lost in Fzoul's thunderous, "*Destroy him!*"

The priest of Bane brought his arm down with a flourish, pointing right at Elminster.

Zhentarim, Banite priests, and priestesses of Loviatar all unleashed deadly spells, hurling them with glee, all wanting to be part of obliterated that lone figure on the steps.

Elminster's world became roiling flame, tongues of fire that swirled like white snowflakes in a roaring, purple-black darkness as the Weave was torn, Faerûn

shrieked aloud, and he was plucked off his feet, shaken like a doll, and hurled—

Nowhere at all, as Mystra manifested all around him in an armor of eerie blue light, dancing sparks that dazzled the eyes with their hue.

Two huge and long-lashed eyes opened behind Elminster and drank in the darkness, and nine silver stars blossomed out of those sparks. Two of those stars darted into Mystra's eyes, and the other seven began to circle her slumped, pain-wracked Chosen.

Gathering all the magic hurled at him . . . and slowly, one spell after another, sending it all back whence it came.

The huge floating eyes of the goddess swept across the shouting Zhentarim army, regarding them with something like sorrow, then lifted to meet Manshoon's astonished and outraged gaze.

As he stared at Mystra, and Mystra stared back at him, the First Lord of Zhentil Keep began to scream in terror.

Beholders appeared, rising menacingly into view over rooftops with their eyestalks writhing, gliding forward with fell intent—only to melt away in an instant. A moment later, every last foulwing faded to nothingness, spilling shrieking riders out of the sky.

The balcony where Manshoon and Fzoul stood broke off the front of the mansion it adorned and fell to earth, slowly and soundlessly. Clinging to it, the two mightiest of the Zhentarim bawled like babies, clawing at the stones.

It came to rest very gently, with no crash at all, but the two men pitched forward onto their faces, trembling in fear. Fzoul fainted, and Manshoon hid his face in his hands, daring only to peek between them.

He saw Mystra bend her will and power on the army at the foot of the steps. Baneguards vanished in bony silence, black armor was suddenly gone from hairy and horrified men, and spears and swords were swept away from their hands.

As they broke and fled, pelting away down the streets as fast as they could run, moaning and trampling each other in their fear, the goddess roared up into a spire of blue flame.

That great tongue of fire rose with a thunderous snarl, to tower high over Swordgates, to loom into the sky above Zhentil Keep and catch distant, awed eyes—then flashed, blinding many watchers, and—vanished.

On balconies and rooftops, down alleys and in windows, every last priest and priestess collapsed, all dashed senseless at once.

Silence fell. Mystra was gone.

Leaving Manshoon weeping and trembling, and a weary and wincing Elminster regarding him with disgust.

Stumbling in obvious pain, and trailing a scorched smell, El came slowly down the steps. Over the rubble, over the bodies of the trampled, over fallen weapons and spilled blood, across the street to where the First Lord of Zhentil Keep cowered.

Citizens were watching, peering from windows and alleys, from doors and from atop carts down the streets, as Elminster came up to Manshoon.

“For years, ye have owed thy life to a promise,” he told the leader of the Zhentarim quietly. “Ye almost threw that life away this day. Try to learn some wisdom.”

On his haunches, Manshoon spun around and covered his ears, turning his back on the bearded Chosen.

Who rolled his eyes, drew back one dusty-booted foot, and gave the First Lord a solid kick in the pants, pitching him over onto his face.

Then Elminster stalked away, not looking back.

Face down in the dirt and furious, Manshoon snarled.

“I swear,” he whispered, knowing how many eyes were upon him, “I’ll slay you some day, Elminster. And work it so that as you die, you know full well who has slain you.”

He kept still, hunched down. For now, though, he must play the overconfident fool, to avoid being destroyed by Mystra as too dangerous. Yet at the same time work, with infinite patience and contingency upon contingency, scheme overlapping scheme, toward ultimate triumph.

Oh, the things he could do without being hampered by Elminster's meddlings!

Hah, the things he could do to Elminster if the old bearded goat didn't have the goddess protecting him!

“There will come a day, Elminster of Shadowdale,” Manshoon announced to his own spellchamber quietly, as he teleported back to its dark, deserted safety, “when *my* chance will come. A day when you aren't cloaked and armored in the favor of a goddess.”

He turned slowly on one heel, to look around at the quiet darkness. “And on that day,” he added with a crooked smile, “Manshoon will laugh—and Elminster will die.”

Find out what happens when Elminster faces off against Manshoon alone in *Elminster Must Die*.



THE GRIBBITS DETECTIVE AGENCY

A DRAGON FRIENDS ADVENTURE
FOR 1ST-LEVEL CHARACTERS

WRITTEN BY
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Janos Meer, the powerful underworld figure known as the Beggar King, has vanished. Gribbits—Meer’s right-hand goblin—has tasked a group of neophyte adventurers with getting to the bottom of where his boss has gone, and why. This is easier said than done, of course. The explosive destruction quite accidentally meted out by the Dragon Friends some months prior has made their city a dangerous place. It’s up to the adventurers to follow the clues through the urban chaos, unravel the mystery of the missing Meer, and maybe—just maybe—expose a conspiracy greater than any of them expected.

(Unless the players have read this bit . . . in which case, they might well be expecting a great big conspiracy.)

The Gribbits Detective Agency is a DUNGEONS & DRAGONS adventure for four 1st-level characters.

ADVENTURE SUMMARY

For the past two months, Janos Meer—better known as the Beggar King—has been investigating the rise and collapse of the city’s sinister Artificer Cult. The Artificers were exposed by the Dragon Friends (working for Meer), in an investigation that culminated with the great fire that consumed half the city. With the cult outlawed, its members have seemingly fled the city, leaving their glitterman construct guards standing dormant throughout the streets.

In this time of urban renewal, much praise has been given to a newly famous Barovian émigré by the name of Alexei ‘Lexi’ Holstmann. He is a recent investor in an area known as the Shipline district, where the city’s shipwrights dry-dock, salvage, and decommission decrepit warships. But Holstmann is better known for having used his wealth to open his factories to the poor and displaced folk of the city. Food and shelter are provided for all those willing to work for the Barovian merchant prince.

Unknown to all, Janos Meer uncovered a plot by Holstmann to convert the vessels of the Shipline into a working armada in service to the Artificers—and was seized as a result. He’s now being held in the Shipline to prevent Holstmann’s plans from being undone. The characters have just three hours to uncover this plot before Holstmann’s refurbished armada launches, and a great new power is established along the Sword Coast.

Unfortunately for the cause of natural justice, the characters are not the only ones investigating Meer’s disappearance. The Dragon Friends are also on the trail, and though they mean well, that group of oft-bumbling adventurers is likely to become an incompetent thorn in the side of the party. Even as clever characters expose Holstmann’s plots, the Dragon Friends will be coming to entirely wrong conclusions about the source of those plots—and possibly murdering dozens of innocents as a result. It’s all in a day’s work.

LOCATIONS

The Gribbits Detective Agency is written to take place between seasons one and two of the *Dragon Friends* podcast. As such, it is located in the Dragon Friends’

THE DRAGON FRIENDS’ DETECTIVE AGENCY

This adventure takes place within a tight three-hour time frame. While the characters are investigating the disappearance of Janos Meer, another group of his friends have been tasked with the same job. The Dragon Friends are on the case. Gods help us all.

Use the following guidelines to track the Dragon Friends’ movements during the adventure. You can choose to keep Freezo, Philge, and Bobby an “off-screen” presence, with the characters dealing only with the aftermath of their aggressive inquiries. Or you can have the characters bump into them, playing the Dragon Friends using the 1st-level character sheets at the end of the adventure. It’s up to you how these two investigations dovetail.

During the First Bell. Bobby has found a coded message left for him by Janos Meer that suggests something has happened to the Beggar King. He summons his friend Philge but can’t find Freezo, leaving a note at the latter’s bakery. When Freezo finds the note, he quickly sets out and the three meet up.

Before the Second Bell. The Dragon Friends make their way to the tavern known as the Shady Dock. There—mistaking the bartender’s angling for a bribe as complicity in some sort of conspiracy—they begin an all-out bar brawl with the patrons. While one of those patrons is being beaten senseless, he lets slip that something nefarious is happening at a Southern Ward almshouse operated by the Grunwertz Trust.

Before the Third Bell. Following their lead, the Dragon Friends make their way to the almshouse. There, they confront Leopold Grunwertz and (incorrectly) decide that he is at the center of a grand conspiracy to use down-and-out folk as slave labor on the Shipline. They burn his operation to the ground.

own peculiar version of Waterdeep—after the collapse of the Artificer Cult and the release of the black dragon Gabu’srath, but before the Dragon Friends leave for Barovia. Interested Dungeon Masters can immerse themselves in this particularly dumb expanded universe at www.thedragonfriends.com and wherever good podcasts are downloaded.

With that said, the events herein can be transported with little effort to any major coastal fantasy city whose people are recovering from traumatic events. Feel free to substitute Waterdeep with Baldur’s Gate, Neverwinter, or another city of your own devising.

The adventure takes place at the following locations within the city:

- **The Beggar Court** in the sewers and tunnels beneath the streets, where the Beggar King holds sway over the wretched thieves and vagrants of the city.
- Various locations in **the streets of the city**, as the characters pursue Janos Meer and his kidnappers.
- Among the decrepit hulks of **the Shipline** and on board **The Fury of Holstmann**, the Barovian merchant prince’s secret flagship.

KEY CHARACTERS

The following NPCs are central to the adventure.

Janos Meer. Cocky, grizzled, and devious, the so-called Beggar King has run the city’s unofficial Guild of Thieves, Tricksters, and Beggars as long as anyone



can remember. Deeply suspicious of the Artificers (and of any new power brokers that might replace them), Meer has links to the lords of the city, and often resolves problems too distasteful for civic leadership to contemplate.

Gribbits. Janos Meer's faithful quartermaster, lawyer, scribe, and dogsbody, Gribbits is a goblin who has found work in the Beggar Court since a traumatizing period of employment with the Dragon Friends. He has been beside himself with panic since Meer disappeared, and fears that he will somehow be blamed for the loss of a major player in the city's underworld.

Alexei 'Lexi' Holstmann. Holstmann is a relative newcomer to the city from the distant nation of Barovia, but he has become quite popular for his willingness to splash money around and for his charity toward the city's poor and displaced. He has been hired by the Artificers to undertake a daring heist—stealing an armada's worth of serviceable warships out from under the nose of the city lords. To this end, he has taken over much of the Shipline district and is using labor from all over the city to refit and ready his fleet for launch.

Leopold Grunwertz. The operator of the Grunwertz Trust almshouse has a reputation in the city as a virtuous and charitable figure. But in the aftermath of the great fire, every almshouse in the city has been filled to bursting, and Grunwertz's operation is no exception. Faced with the impossible task of caring for more

people than he can accommodate, the overly trusting Grunwertz has accepted aid from Alexei Holstmann—and has no inkling of the nefarious work to which Holstmann has set the poor folk now under his care.

The Dragon Friends. Meer knew he was getting close to the truth of what Holstmann is up to. Just before he disappeared, he got word to his friend Bobby Pancakes, a halfling rogue who travels with the adventuring party known as the Dragon Friends. Bobby and his friends Freezo (a high elf warlock) and Philge (a half-orc barbarian) are now hot on the tail of Janos's kidnappers, and they don't care what they break or set fire to in pursuit of their friend.

Uncovering the Artificer Cult presents a hard enough task for the characters. The Dragon Friends are only going to make it harder.

ACT 1: A MEETING AT THE BEGGAR COURT

When you're ready to begin the adventure, read the following:

Your attempts to find work in this shining city have brought you more than once into contact with its criminal underworld, and to the attention of the Beggar King, Janos Meer. This morning, you found a card with his mark outside your lodging rooms. There was no other message. None is needed. You are summoned to the Beggar Court.

Deep in the sprawling tunnels and sewers beneath the city's streets, thieves and beggars ply and prepare their trades under the watchful eye of the Beggar King. At least this is usually the case. Janos cuts a conspicuous figure from the wide-open doors of his shambling offices. But today, you arrive to find those doors closed fast, and the ground floor of his operation almost abandoned.

The better part of the day goes by as you wait, before you hear boots on the stairwell. A small, pathetic figure appears, wearing a disheveled suit that seems simultaneously too big and too small. This is the goblin lawyer Gribbits: a dogsbody and assistant that Meer seems to like to have around, though it's hard to tell why.

"Umm. Hello. Mr. Meer is indisposed. Today you'll be working for me." Gribbits clears his throat. "Sorry."

Gribbits doesn't know a lot, and he plays his cards close to his chest. He wants Meer found but doesn't want to give anything away about the Beggar King's work or projects. He'll answer questions about when he last saw Janos (the previous night) and where (in his personal office), but he doesn't want to say what his boss has been doing. He also doesn't want to let the characters search Janos's office, but a successful DC 12 Charisma (Persuasion) check or a DC 10 Charisma (Intimidation) check convinces the goblin to unlock the doors and bring the party inside.

RUMORS AND INNUENDO

It is a time of rebuilding in the city. A character who succeeds on an Intelligence (Investigation) check of your devising (or who just makes a new friend) might discover a useful bit of information. Roll a d8 or choose from the following:

1. *[In your best (worst) Northern English accent]* "Here's something for ya'. Come closer . . . closer still! I've got me a new hat. All pretty like, you can see it atop me head, here."
2. "There are some nefarious goings-on at the Grunwertz Trust—an almshouse in the Southern Ward. Residents are being exploited for slave labor and the like by their cruel overlord, Leopold Grunwertz."
3. "Stay away from that warlock's bakery. Freezo, I think his name is? I heard that an orphan tried to steal a loaf of bread, and this Freezo turned him into a swarm of bees!"
4. "I saw Alexei Holstmann last week in a tavern, shouting the entire room drinks for the night. As if it wasn't anything."
5. "There's tension between the Shipwrights and the Beggar King. No one really knows who's in charge of the guild since Albrecht Rumsfeld died. Seems that Janos Meer is none too trusting of whoever it is, though."
6. "The Shipwright's Guild? Everyone knows they're actually a secret society operated out the back of the Shady Dock tavern. The guild's leader, Albrecht Rumsfeld, was an emerging player in the underworld before he was killed. And it's whispered that he was a werewolf to boot."
7. "Those glittermen guards the Artificers built might be shiny, but the rusting hulks on every corner are made of worthless alloy. It's not surprising they didn't catch on. Word is they couldn't even operate down at the docks without seizing up. Something about all that salt water."
8. "I was talking to someone at the Shady Dock tavern, used to be a captain. Told me that every single one of the 'derelict' ships abandoned on the Shipline is still true seaworthy."

OFFICE

Janos Meer's office is a perfect study in conspiracy theorist clichés: an overflowing desk, pitchers of now-cold coffee, and a vast map of the city behind his chair, covered in a mess of notes, etchings, pins, and string. This map tracks Janos's recent investigations into both the collapse of the Artificers and the corruption of the Shipwrights Guild—a criminal fraternity sprung out of the city's Order of Master Shipwrights.

The corrupt Shipwrights have long been a thorn in Meer's side, and have been in turmoil since the death of their leader, the werewolf Albrecht Rumsfeld—another victim of the Dragon Friends' brand of indiscriminate justice. Several locations on the map are clearly marked as being worthy of additional investigation—Freezo's bakery, the House of the Artificers, the Grunwertz Trust almshouse, the Shady Dock tavern, and Manor Holstmann. See "Act 2: The Streets of the City" for more information.

Beyond the map, the office holds little of note. The wall opposite the desk features a truly repulsive example of the local art scene in a gaudy frame. (Sort

of a sad, smiling child on a boat. But he's maybe . . . an angel?) Behind the picture is a locked wall safe.

Gribbits becomes quite upset if the characters remove anything from the room or the safe, but he is too much of a coward to try to stop them. The safe can be opened with a successful DC 15 Dexterity check using thieves' tools, and contains papers relating to the movements of the Shipwrights, ledgers documenting various ne'er-dowells indebted to Janos, and a bag containing 25 gp.

WHAT HAPPENED TO JANOS MEER?

Following the destruction of the Artificers and the great fire, Meer was tasked by the city lords with hunting down and eradicating any remaining traces of the cult. Meer suspected that the Shipwrights—his longtime enemies and a proxy of the Artificers—were up to something in the Shipline district. This naturally led him to suspect Alexei Holstmann (who has invested heavily in the district) and Leopold Grunwertz (who has provided much of Holstmann's workforce) of being in cahoots with the Shipwrights and the Artificers. It was while searching for proof of these connections that Meer learned of how some of the Shipwrights' leaders have used their influence to have serviceable warships decommissioned and sent to the Shipline.

For getting so close to the truth, Meer has paid a steep price. The previous night, a team of Artificer operatives intercepted him in the course of his investigations. He has been beaten until incapacitated, then bound and transferred to the warship *The Fury of Holstmann*, where he's to be held while Holstmann's final plans play out.

ACT 2: THE STREETS OF THE CITY

Janos's map features five locations that he felt were significant enough to mark—Freezo's bakery, the House of the Artificers, the Grunwertz Trust almshouse, the Shady Dock tavern, and Manor Holstmann. The characters can visit one location per hour, not knowing that things will come to a head after they visit three of the five locations—one before each of the next three bells that mark off the passage of hours in the city.

It's late afternoon when the characters set out. Allow them to pursue their leads in any order, but make sure they are aware of how time is progressing. After they have visited three locations, they are ambushed by forces in the employ of Holstmann and the Artificers. See the "Ambush!" section for more information.

BEN AND DAVE SLACK NOTES

Ben: How many options do we need for the rumors and innuendo bit?

Ben: Twenty?

Dave: Reckon we'll be good with ten.

Ben: Ah! I reckon twenty's doable, though.

Dave: If you think you can do twenty, go for it. But ten is fine. *[Thirty minutes passes]*

Ben: F*** it. I've done eight, and it was a slog.



FREEZO'S BAKERY

The location noted on Janos's map is in a once-fashionable and now surprisingly affordable part of the city—a bakery sandwiched up against a ruined haberdashery and a shop that sells overpriced collectable pins. With most of the neighborhood showing signs of damage from the great fire, the fresh, solid, and uncharred storefront looks slightly out of place.

“FREEZO'S BAKERY” has been painted on the window in simple, almost childlike letters. A wooden figure stands outside the establishment—an intense-looking high elf with an unnervingly focused smile, presumably a likeness of the baker himself. But despite the signage and the wares in the window, the bakery is closed, and the door is sealed with a rather conspicuous padlock. A sign nailed to the door reads “DANGER! KEEP OUT! GUARD DOGS!” Above and below the sign, two smaller notices have been tacked up.

This bakery is run by the warlock and transient murderer known as Freezo. Some time after the Dragon Friends accidentally engulfed the city in flames, he purchased the business in this once-reputable part of town—a transaction made possible only by the plummeting property values brought on by the fire.

The first note is written in Freezo's childlike scrawl, while the second shows Bobby Pancakes's refined hand. Both are written in Common.

- “NO MONEY KEPT ON PREMISES”
- “F—Came and you were out. Important business from Janos. P with me. Meet us where it shows on the map.” In place of a signature, a stamped seal on the note

shows a pancake with a knob of butter in a skillet. The bottom of the note (where the indicated map was drawn) has been ripped off.

The lock is a suspiciously simple one, and a successful DC 8 Dexterity check with thieves' tools opens it. But though the lock itself isn't trapped, the space just inside the door is rigged with a bucket-and-rope trap. A successful DC 12 Wisdom (Perception) check notices the trap, while a successful DC 14 Dexterity check allows a character to dodge it. A character caught by the trap is doused in blood—cow's blood, in fact. The rope then also pulls open a trapdoor in the bakery floor, revealing two tiny, angry **ghouls**.

Each ghoul has only 12 hit points due to its emaciated condition. Each has advantage on attack rolls made against any character covered in cow's blood, as a result of the impractical amount of time Freezo has spent training their Pavlovian response to that substance. The ghouls' cage beneath the floor contains only some rags and bones, a tiny bell, and a sign in Freezo's hand that reads “PEOPLE NEVER LISTEN.”

Once the ghouls are dealt with, the characters can help themselves to all the bread they like, or head to Freezo's office in the back of the bakery. This is a surprisingly spartan affair, with competently laid out ledgers and inventory reports, and an iron safe under the desk. There is little suggestion of the baker's personal life, other than a small gilt-framed picture of a smiling elf couple standing in front of a house. A character who removes the picture from the frame finds a note on its reverse side: “SAMPLE PORTRAIT. MAYPOLE & SONS, FRAME MERCHANTS.”

A successful DC 14 Dexterity check using thieves' tools opens the safe. Contrary to the note at the door, it contains 36 gp and 20 sp, as well as a silver locket with a picture of a smiling man and his son (worth 10 gp) and a tin whistle.

THE HOUSE OF THE ARTIFICERS

All that's left of the House of the Artificers is a pile of rubble where the building that was the Artificer Cult's public front once stood, and a set of stone stairs descending into the darkness of the levels below. As you move down the staircase, its stones become more charred the deeper you go. At the bottom, you reach a cavernous great hall, entirely blackened and reeking of sulfur. There are no signs of life.

While the cause of the great fire is still disputed, no one argues about where it started. The inferno that would engulf half the city began here in the heart of the Trades Ward, as the blackened walls and stench of death in the great hall of the House of the Artificers attests.

The fire started by the Artificers' enthralled dragon Gabu'strath devastated this part of the city, killing hundreds and leaving thousands homeless. Although signs of fresh construction are everywhere, most houses and tenements are still missing walls and roofing. The almshouses and temples are at capacity, but can still care for only a fraction of the dispossessed.

If the adventurers pick through the debris, they find the rusted body of a glitterman (see the appendix for more on these automata). A successful DC 13 Intelligence (Investigation) check reveals that although the construct has suffered superficial fire damage, its breakdown was ultimately caused by exposure to salt, which has gotten into its intricate clockwork mechanisms and caused a complete seize up.

If the adventurers explore further staircases leading off the great hall, they find themselves in a warren of dirt-floored corridors that have all caved in. In one small antechamber, a carefully arranged pyramid of rocks is topped by a large, filthy hat covered in crude stars and moons. The letters "DILJ" are crudely chalked on a nearby wall, along with a drawing of a sad face. Characters digging under the rocks uncover the body of a small-town half-orc with big-city dreams—and should really take a moment to evaluate their career priorities.

THE GRUNWERTZ TRUST ALMSHOUSE

If the characters visit the almshouse before the third bell, make use of the following read-aloud text and scenario. If they come here at the third bell, adjust the encounter as detailed in "The Dragon Friends," below.

In the aftermath of the great fire, the Grunwertz Trust has become home to over two hundred of the city's destitute folk. You enter through the unlocked front door, seeing these freshly minted homeless sleeping three to a bed in every room and corridor. There's little space to move as you make your way through the teeming mass of the tired, the hungry, and the generally wretched toward the office of the proprietor, Leopold Grunwertz.

As you open the office door, you find that even this area is being used as makeshift accommodation, with two families working and sleeping across all the available floor space. Grunwertz sits behind a central desk in an angular suit of simple, dark cloth with a tall, starched collar. He peers up at you, removing his spectacles and carefully placing them to the side. He does not seem thrilled to see you.

"Yes?!"

Leopold Grunwertz is trying to get through a mountain of paperwork without waking the sleeping children curled up at the base of his desk. Their parents get on with busywork, sorting through piles of scavenged scrap metal.

Grunwertz is proud of his work, and he freely answers most questions about his operation. He talks of how he doesn't enjoy putting his residents to work, but it's the only way he can afford to accommodate and feed so many of them. The people living in the office are thin and haggard, but they are also extremely deferential to Grunwertz. If asked, they'll say he treats them well and that they're glad to be there.

Grunwertz's plan is to use the money from selling scrap salvaged from the fire to purchase the adjacent property and house hundreds more of the needy. In the meantime, he's been approached by someone he describes as "a philanthropist" (actually Holstmann), who has offered to house the homeless that Grunwertz can't in the wrecks of the Shipline. It's far from ideal, but by all accounts, the hulls of the derelict ships are at least warm and dry.

If the adventurers get an opportunity to search Grunwertz's desk, they find a letter signed "A.H.," asking when Grunwertz expects another group to arrive at the Shipline, and delicately inquiring as to whether their arrival could be expedited. If pressured, Grunwertz might show the letter to the adventurers as proof that the operation he runs is above board.

Alexei Holstmann has sworn Grunwertz to secrecy regarding their relationship. But under sufficient pressure, Grunwertz reveals that the Barovian is his secret philanthropist benefactor.

Grunwertz has very little money, but if the characters threaten him or demand it, he offers them the contents of his safe—213 cp. Everything else, he assures them, is being spent on the poor.

If the characters attack him, Grunwertz calls for Lockwood and Mulligan, two **thugs** who rush in and defend him. The entire almshouse quickly erupts in shouts of alarm, drawing the attention of the city watch if the characters linger too long.

THE DRAGON FRIENDS

If the characters visit the almshouse on the third bell, they find it burned down by the Dragon Friends, who have deduced (incorrectly) that Leopold Grunwertz is responsible for the disappearance of Meer and is the head of a grand conspiracy.

In this event, the characters find Leopold lingering in the wreckage of his life's work, baffled and broken. He is so distraught that he can't speak, and the characters have no opportunity to learn anything from him or from the terrified folk who fled the fire. However, with no need to spend any time here, the characters can seek out a fourth location before the next bell.

THE SHADY DOCK

If the characters visit the tavern before the second bell, make use of the following read-aloud text and scenario. If they come here after the second bell, adjust the encounter as detailed in "The Dragon Friends," below.

The sound of off-key sea shanties is heard long before you see the Shady Dock. The waterfront tavern is a weatherboard shack, whose walls lean in a way that suggests the entire structure is trying to hurl itself into the harbor.

As you enter the bar, you're struck by the overpowering smell of vomit and rum. As far as you can tell in the dim light, about twenty patrons are present, all in various states of inebriation. A few stools are available at the bar.

The Artificers might be outlawed in the city, but that cult's junior associates in the criminal fraternity known as the Shipwright's Guild remain a thorn in the Beggar King's side. The Shady Dock is not just the Shipwrights' unofficial guild house and a venue of regular and unspeakable violence. (Although it definitely is both those things.) It's also a trading post for gossip, hearsay, slander, half-truths, and whopping lies. An investigator could do worse than to take a seat and listen in on a conversation or two.

The bartender is an intelligent **bugbear** by the name of Brilig Blackbash. He hears a lot, but—knowing the value of what he hears—is not usually forthcoming with it. Some gold can help him open up. Five **thugs** of the Shipwrights Guild sit near the bar, drunkenly arguing the news of the day.

With a successful DC 10 Dexterity (Stealth) check (to get close) or Wisdom (Perception) check (to listen in from a distance), a character learns of any of the following useless topics from the patrons of the tavern:

- A recent mutiny near the Moonshae Isles
- A treasure hunter bragging about looting a wreck off the coast of the Mhair Archipelago
- Two drunken half-orcs trying to settle who can shout the loudest

A character who sits discreetly for long enough can also catch a useful tidbit of information: that the Shipline district is full of bursting with the poor and dispossessed of the city, all being paid by 'this new Barovian lord' for their service therein.

No one in the bar has seen Janos Meer for a while, but he never used to come by that much in the first place.

THE DRAGON FRIENDS

If the characters visit the Shady Dock after the second bell, the Dragon Friends have already stopped by. This has left the public rooms all but demolished, the thugs unconscious, and a very jittery Brilig sporting a black eye—and, inexplicably, a bite mark on his nose. The bugbear makes it clear he wants "no more trouble with adventurers," and breaks down almost immediately in response to a successful DC 15 Charisma (Intimidation) check (made with advantage if the party includes a half-orc, a halfling, or an elf). Brilig then explains that the Dragon Friends demanded access to Rumsfeld's office, and gives them the key to the office while pleading to be left in peace.

LOCKED OFFICE

The Shady Dock doubles as the de facto headquarters of the Shipwright's Guild—a secret criminal fraternity in almost-open warfare with Janos Meer's Beggar Court. Albrecht Rumsfeld, the recently deceased leader of the Shipwrights, kept an office in the tavern's back room. Brilig has the key, but the lock can be picked with a successful DC 11 Dexterity check using thieves' tools.

The small office stinks of wolfsbane, and contains a utilitarian desk, a chair set with manacles, a small folio, and a long presentation case. The folio contains notes about the building and decommissioning of ships. A character who studies it and has a seafaring background (or who succeeds on a DC 14 Intelligence check) notes the curious fact that a number of heavy warships are being decommissioned while still well in their prime. All of those ships have been sent to the graveyard of the Shipline.

The presentation case is empty, though an impression in its velvet lining suggests that it once held a ceremonial sword. A note tucked inside the case has been opened, but still holds a seal impressed with the sigil of the Artificers. The note reads: "Albrecht: I could not ask for a better dockmaster or a fairer friend. Take this gift for your troubles. It's been in my family for generations—and is probably even older than you!—Lexi."

MANOR HOLSTMANN

The palatial manor that is home to Alexei Holstmann is located in the Sea Ward. After walking down a driveway that can be described only as 'punishingly, ostentatiously, and compensatingly long', you arrive at the house proper. Two enormous oak doors are yours to knock on.

Any knocking sees the doors opened by McElroy—a human butler (**commoner**) who informs the party that Commodore Holstmann is not home. McElroy isn't keen on visitors, but if the characters can demonstrate (or fake) decorum and good breeding, he answers a few questions if politely asked. He'll happily explain that the commodore is newly arrived to the city, and can tell a little of Holstmann's history if pressed. His family escaped somehow from Barovia when he was a

BEN AND DAVE SLACK NOTES

Dave: Wait—I'm pretty sure Barovia is landlocked.

Ben: Ha! . . . Wait, why is that a problem?

Dave: Because you've made him a commodore.

Ben: Oh, look, if the Austrians can make *The Sound of Music*, it's fine.

Dave: Umm . . . ?

Ben: Von Trapp was an admiral!

Dave: . . .

Ben: Actually, to be honest, I think the Americans made *The Sound of Music*.

Dave: We can come back to it.

child, bringing fabulous wealth from the old country. In addition to that wealth, Commodore Holstmann is known for his intelligence, grace, and charity.

If the adventurers inquire about Janos Meer, McElroy says that no one by that name has come by the house, but a successful DC 12 Wisdom (Insight) check suggests that he's lying. If the characters sufficiently pressure McElroy, he confesses that in truth, Meer stopped by last week, demanded to speak to the commodore, and was turned away.

If the adventurers want to bypass the aged retainer, they can get inside the ostentatiously arranged Waterdavian townhouse by any appropriate means—picking the lock on a side door and sneaking in, bluffing or intimidating the butler, fighting their way through, climbing in a window, and so forth. Holstmann's furnishings and art are expensive, but are awkwardly bolted down. A skilled thief with plenty of time could claim 75 gp worth of filchable art and goods on the first floor of the townhouse. The second floor and the basement are occupied by servants at all hours of the day, putting them off limits for effective burglary.

Although most members of Holstmann's staff are noncombatants, he employs one inadvisably brave kennel hand (a **commoner**) with five hunting **mastiffs**. The dogs can be released at any point if the characters attract attention, threaten McElroy or other servants, or when it's time for them to move on.

PRIVATE STUDY

Holstmann's study is upstairs in the family wing. Characters will discover it only if they decide to explore the house. If the characters get into the study, they see it dominated by a giant scale model of the Shipline and the commodore's public works in the district. A successful DC 18 Intelligence (Investigation) check notes that the miniature of one of the warships has hairline hinges and opens up, revealing a cavity holding a signet ring bearing the sigil of the Artificers.

AMBUSH!

While the characters have been poking their noses into Lexi Holstmann's business, some of the commodore's associates have become aware of their activities. At the end of the third bell, those associates attempt to dissuade the characters from making any further inquiries.

After the adventurers have investigated their third location, but before they leave that location, one **scout** and three **guards** arrive. The guards attempt to sneak up on the party from concealed ambush points while their scout leader approaches the characters, warning them to back off of their investigation. "The days of the Beggar Court are over, and the bastard Janos Meer is finished—as he should have been long ago." If the characters do not immediately agree to cease their investigation and leave the city, Holstmann's goons attack.

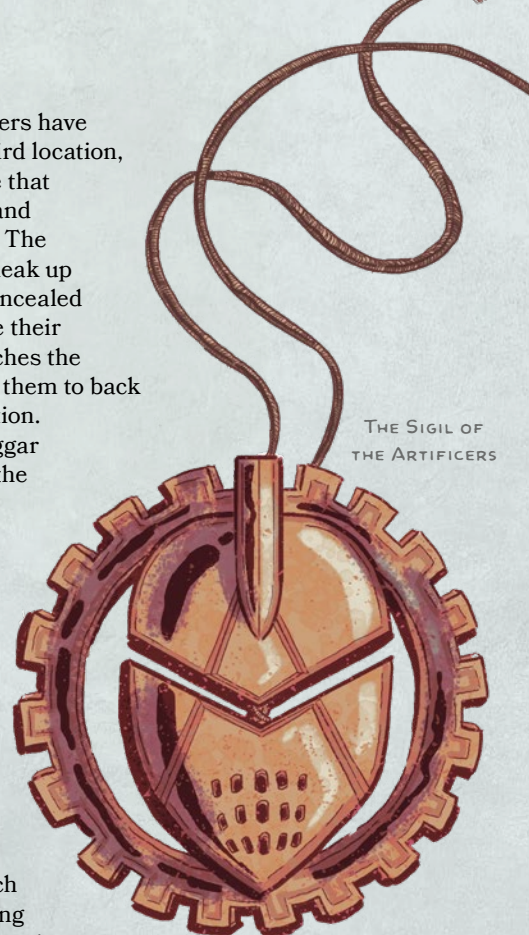
Once defeated, the attackers are each revealed to be wearing a dull clay pendant bearing the unmistakable sigil of the Artificers. One also bears a chit of receipt of payment concerning the delivery of a "valuable item" to a vessel called *The Fury of Holstmann*, docked at the Shipline. If any of the goons are left alive for interrogation, they'll admit their allegiance to the cult and that they were recently hired to kidnap Meer and transfer him to *The Fury of Holstmann*. Their contract came through the Shipwrights, though they don't know who the client was.

If the characters are unfortunate enough to have this encounter at the Shady Dock, Brilig Blackbash and the Shipwright Guild thugs might well join in against the party—making for a fight the characters had best run from. In other areas, the NPCs will run at the first sign of trouble.

ACT 3: THE SHIPLINE

As the adventurers make their way into the Shipline district, read the following:

It is the fate of every ship made by Waterdavian hands to end up one day propped among the derelict timbers of the Shipline. Once a dry dock of last resort, the Shipline is a place where galleons go to die. Those rotten hulks now teem with life, however, as the destitute and wretched of the city find shelter among their ruined timbers.



THE SIGIL OF
THE ARTIFICERS

Tonight, the Shipline is a hive of activity even by its typical noisy standards. It's well past twilight, and yet gangs of impoverished laborers are hard at work on at least half the vessels present. A company of six better-dressed sailors is seen heading toward the largest ship on the line—an old triple-master whose weight makes the dry dock groan beneath her. Emblazoned across the bow of the ship is the legend *The Fury of Holstmann*.

Lexi Holstmann has been using the poor and displaced of the city to refurbish the wrecks and hulking landlocked vessels of the Shipline into a serviceable armada. The Artificer Cult has paid him handsomely for this, promising him power and glory as admiral of their newly minted fleet—once he successfully steals that fleet out from under the noses of the city's leaders.

Much of the activity of this refurbishment is centered around *The Fury of Holstmann*—the pride of the line, and already marked by Alexei Holstmann as his flagship. Six sailors (use **bandit** statistics) are headed to it as the characters approach. The cult has been moving sailors onto the ships all day in small groups, in preparation for the pending launch of the fleet.

Characters not wanting to board *The Fury of Holstmann* by way of the gangplank can climb up

the rough sides of the ship with a successful DC 13 Strength (Athletics) or Dexterity (Acrobatics) check. Using a rope and a grappling hook grants advantage on the check. Climbing characters end up on the open deck of the ship, where each must then succeed on a DC 10 Dexterity (Stealth) check to avoid notice from a nearby patrol of three sailors (**bandits**). Similar patrols make rounds along the dry dock if the characters take too long to decide how to get on board.

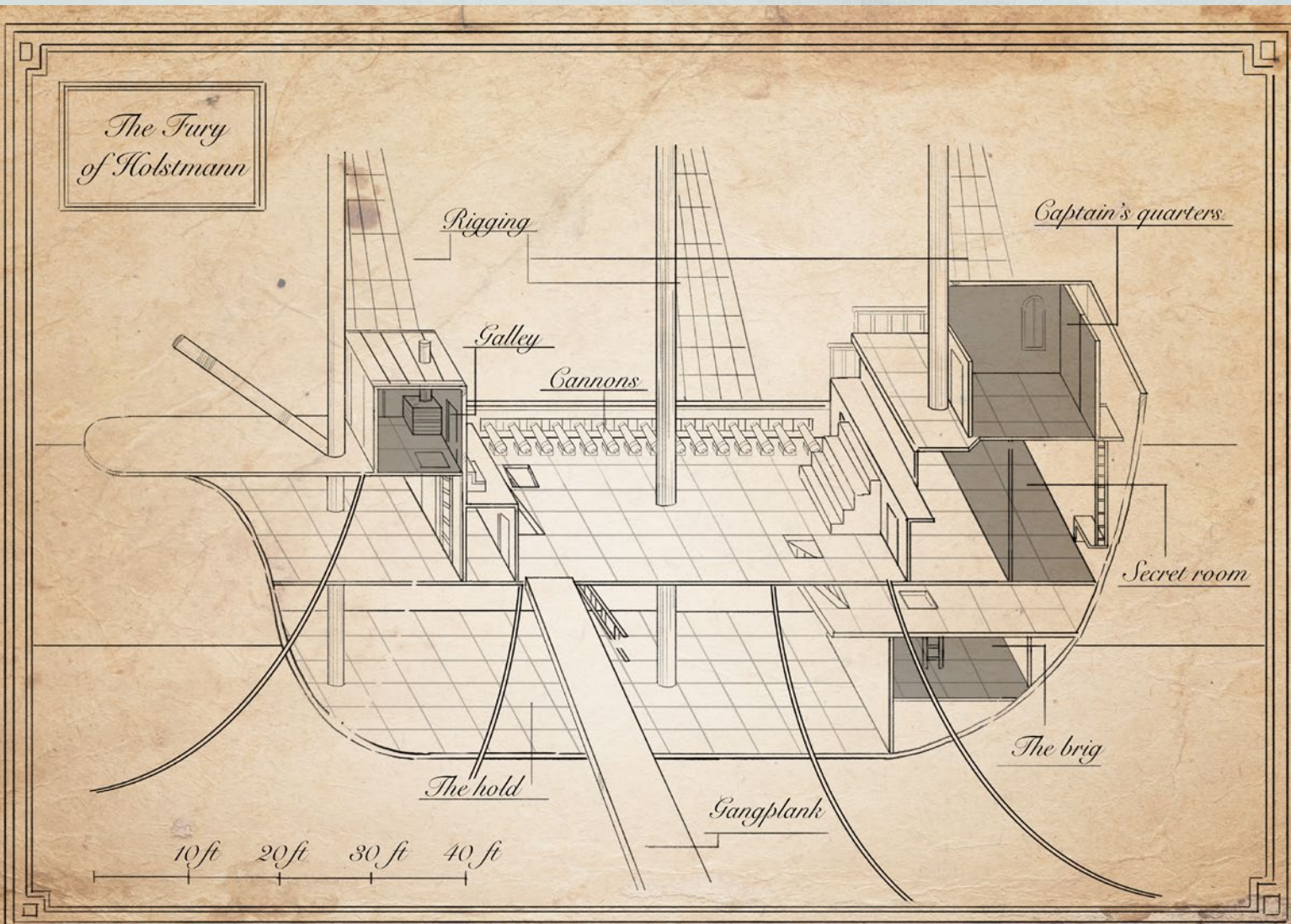
THE FURY OF HOLSTMANN

The Fury of Holstmann is a labyrinthine old frigate. The details of how the characters move between the keyed areas of the ship can be as easy or as complex as desired, but those unaccustomed to shipboard life might struggle to find their way through the maze of decks.

MOVING AROUND THE DECKS

All the outside decks of the ship are dotted with barrels and crates filled with provisions, black powder, and rum. Sailors and laborers move regularly across the decks, but most keep to their own business. *The Fury of Holstmann* is large and newly crewed, and most members of the crew don't know each other yet. As such, the characters can easily move throughout the ship if they don't cause a ruckus.

If the characters are prowling around any area that doesn't have crew members present in its description,



they have a 1-in-6 chance of attracting the attention of a patrol of three sailors (**bandits**) if that seems interesting.

A. GANGPLANK

The main point of entrance onto the decks of *The Fury of Holstmann* is a long, narrow ramp leading up from the dry dock. The gangplank is overseen by shift master Carlyle—a no-nonsense sailor (**bandit**) whose flair for penmanship is evidenced by the surprisingly well-kept journal in his pocket. He is immediately suspicious of the adventurers if they attempt to board the ship by the gangplank, and it takes a successful DC 15 Charisma (Deception or Persuasion) check or a DC 13 Charisma (Intimidation) check for him to let them through.

Examination of Carlyle's journal shows that the ship is currently full to bursting with crew members, most of whom have been assigned space in the holds. The journal also shows (or Carlyle can confirm) that Commodore Holstmann is currently on board, and that Janos Meer is detained in the brig.

B. CANNONS

Fifteen cannons line the starboard deck, each pointing east toward the rest of the "fleet." Black powder and cannon balls in barrels and crates are stacked neatly nearby. A small chest, more gilded and ornate than the other mundane crates scattered around the decks, sits near the cannon closest the stern, and is sealed with an arcane lock spell. It contains a pair of Barovian dueling pistols, recently commissioned by Holstmann and only just delivered, as well as a bag of twenty powder charges and twenty bullets. Treat a dueling pistol as a hand crossbow that deals 1d10 piercing damage. As an action, a character can reload up to two pistols with powder charges and bullets.

Characters who decide to use the cannons will, unsurprisingly, alert everyone on the ship to their presence. Five of the cannons are loaded, primed, and helpfully aimed at a perilously stacked row of nearby warships, if that's the kind of thing the adventurers might be interested in. A sailor boss (**thug**) and three sailors (**bandits**) race up from the hold 1d3 + 1 rounds after a cannon is fired (see area E for information).

C. RIGGING

A character can climb the rigging with a successful DC 10 Strength (Athletics) or Dexterity (Acrobatics) check, but Meer is nowhere to be found here.

D. GALLEY

The galley is well stocked with cured meats, barrels of fresh water, and various folk remedies for scurvy. The ship's cook, Steggins, is always present but does not want any trouble. He'll let the characters ransack the room without making a fuss as long as they let him finish making his soup. If they get in the way of his work, the cook goes absolutely berserk, using the statistics of a **thug** and attacking with his huge chef's knife (dealing slashing damage) instead of a mace.

Characters searching the room find a barrel of rum that smells faintly medicinal—because it is. A full waterskin of this tonic provides the benefit of a *potion*

SCUTTLING HOLSTMANN'S PLANS

As they investigate the ship, the characters are able to see that *The Fury of Holstmann* is only lightly secured to the dry dock, held by twelve heavy ropes that can each be cut through with an axe and a successful DC 12 Strength check. Cutting the mooring lines will cause the scuttling of the dry dock, allowing the flagship and the rest of Holstmann's fleet to slip into the harbor. This sabotage has been carefully set up so that Holstmann can steal the fleet in a minimal amount of time.

If the characters decide to cut the lines on *The Fury of Holstmann*, the ship glides into the harbor over the wreckage of the disintegrating drydock. You can decide what ability checks and actions are necessary as the ship lurches into the water, but start with having all the characters succeed on a DC 15 Dexterity (Acrobatics) check to avoid being thrown against a bulkhead or into the harbor. While the ship is in the water, roll a d6 each round of combat. On a 5 or 6, a heavy wave heaves the ship, imposing disadvantage on attack rolls and ability checks. Anyone proficient in Acrobatics or proficient with water vehicles (which includes all crew members) ignores this effect.

of healing. However, a character who drinks the rum again within a 24-hour period gains no benefit and has disadvantage on any ability checks except Charisma (Intimidation) checks for the next 1d3 hours.

E. HOLD

Most of the work still being done on the ship is being performed in the hold. Twenty carpenters (noncombatant **commoners**) are watched over by eleven heavily armed sailors (**bandits**) and a sailor boss (**thug**). The cacophony of construction noise and swearing in the confined space of the hold means that no attention is paid to the characters as they approach, and a successful DC 10 group Dexterity (Stealth) check allows them to traverse the room to the brig. Aside from the carpenters and crew, the hold contains a small fortune in building equipment, hammocks, and rope.

If the alarm is raised anywhere on the ship, the sounds of shouting reach the hold in 3 rounds. The sailor boss responds by taking three of the sailors and racing toward the trouble. The other sailors split up into two groups of four to protect the doors to the brig and the captain's quarters.

F. CAPTAIN'S QUARTERS

Ornate, ostentatious, and dominated by a giant fresco of Castle Ravenloft and the Balinok Mountains of Barovia, this area of the ship makes no attempt to hide its splendor. Expensive furniture fills the room to the point of making it difficult to move, and a candelabra chandelier hangs from the ceiling—an incredibly dangerous bit of decor this close to the gunnery decks.

The commodore is not here. His dressing gown—monogrammed with an "L"—is draped over a needlessly fancy chair.

The fresco on the wall hides a secret door that reveals itself with careful study and a successful DC 13 Intelligence (Investigation) check. Pushing on the slightly protruding image of Castle Ravenloft causes it to depress. The entire fresco then swings open,

revealing a shaft and a ladder leading down to the secret cult room beyond.

G. BRIG

Two **guards**, Langley and Steve, stand before the door to the brig, and are bickering in the way that two guards out in front of any door are wont to do. Any character observing the guards notes that Langley appears to be really into the job. Steve, not so much.

Langley believes in his mission and will fight to the death. He also carries an alarm bell, and will ring it in response to any attack or threat.

Steve has disadvantage on any Charisma contest to convince him to do anything that involves less work. If Steve is reduced to 5 or fewer hit points, he is happy to surrender and tell the adventurers everything he knows: where Meer is held (the brig; Steve has the key), how Holstmann plans to steal the ship (by cutting the mooring lines and scuttling the dry dock), and the fact that Holstmann's pet glitterman arrived on the ship earlier that day.

The brig door can also be opened with a successful DC 15 Dexterity check using thieves' tools. If the characters get into the brig, they find a gagged, bound, and rake-thin Janos Meer. He smells terrible, is unconscious and of no help to anyone, but is alive.

Meer is in dire shape and comatose. Any healing, magical or otherwise, will stabilize him, but the Beggar King remains unconscious and will need to be carried off the ship and back to the Beggar Court. If the adventurers have not yet fully searched the flagship and confronted Holstmann, the door is sturdy and can be locked up again, ensuring Meer's safety for the short term.

H. SECRET ROOM

A hatch at the bottom of the ladder can be opened as an action, revealing a secret room prepared and hidden at exorbitant expense by Holstmann. From here, he communes with his masters in the Artificer Cult. The room contains a small bench next to a *sending stone*, along with a weapon rack full of dueling swords and a chest holding some of Holstmann's emergency funds.

If the characters make it here without having the alarm raised, Holstmann is caught unawares. The characters find Holstmann using the *sending stone* to contact the cult, and attempting to negotiate an increase in his fee before his final moment of triumph. Holstmann is not unguarded, however, as his personal **glitterman** stands motionless and concealed by the side of the hatch. Statistics for Holstmann and the glitterman can be found at the end of the adventure.

The glitterman has been ordered to protect Holstmann at all costs. The first character to enter this area must succeed on a DC 14 Wisdom (Perception) check to notice the glitterman, which otherwise attacks the character with surprise and alerts Holstmann.



COMMODORE ALEXEI
'LEXI' HOLSTMANN

If the characters have caused the crew to go on alert during their infiltration of the ship, Holstmann is ready for them. He has his *vicious hand crossbow* loaded, and has engaged a poisoned needle trap on the door of the hatch to buy time while pleading with the Artificers for more backup. It takes a successful DC 13 Wisdom (Perception) check to spot the trap, and a successful DC 14 Dexterity check with thieves' tools to disable it. The character opening the hatch otherwise takes 1 piercing damage and 5 (1d10) poison damage, and must succeed on a DC 12 Constitution saving throw or be poisoned for 1 hour. Alternatively, the hatch can be kicked in with a successful DC 15 Strength (Athletics) check.

Holstmann might be an idiot, but he fights to the end. Once he is defeated, the rest of the sailors on the ship fall into disarray. If the characters haven't already located Meer (or if they left him behind for safety), he can be quickly rescued in the chaos.

Treasure. Holstmann carries a +1 *scimitar* and a *vicious hand crossbow*, along with a concealed sleeve

quiver holding ten bolts. His fine Barovian clothes are worth 40 gp to an appropriate buyer. Around his neck, he wears an Artificer sigil mark—a bronze amulet bearing the secret sign of the Artificer—that he uses to control his glitterman. This has no cash value, but might be a useful tool for those wanting to infiltrate the cult. Holstmann also wears a gold signet ring worth 25 gp, engraved with his family crest.

The locked trunk in this area contains 100 gp. The key is in Holstmann's pocket, or the lock can be picked with a successful DC 15 Dexterity check using thieves' tools.

AFTERMATH

When the adventurers return to Gribbits, read the following:

Gribbits is beside himself with joy, staring at Meer like he can't believe his awful, weird eyes.

"You've done it! You've bloody done it! He's back and he's . . ." The goblin pauses to check the still-unconscious Meer's pulse. "He's alive!"

Gribbits claps his hands twice above his head. "Meat and drink for our brave adventurers!" An awkward couple of moments pass while nothing happens. The goblin lowers his arms. "Right. Well, I guess catering is off for the day. But, you know, good on you and all that."

Meer will need time to recover, but he does not forget the characters' service. Any favor the Beggar King can do for the adventurers, they need but ask, and he instructs Gribbits to pay the characters 50 gp each. In addition, he invites them to open up permanent underground lodgings in the Beggar Court. There, the characters will be paid a stipend to report to Gribbits as and when the Beggar King requires their services. A sign on the door of their new offices reads: "The Gribbits Detective Agency." And the adventure is done.

The Dragon Friends: Alex Lee, Edan Lacey, Michael Hing, and Simon Greiner

Editing, Development, and Layout for *Dragon+*: Scott Fitzgerald Gray

NPCs AND MONSTERS

GLITTERMAN

Medium construct, unaligned

Armor Class 15 (natural armor)

Hit Points 33 (6d8 + 6)

Speed 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
14 (+2)	12 (+1)	14 (+2)	1 (-5)	3 (-4)	1 (-5)

Skills Perception -2

Damage Immunities poison

Condition Immunities blinded, charmed, deafened, exhaustion, frightened, petrified, poisoned

Senses blindsight 60 ft. (blind beyond this radius), passive Perception 8

Languages —

Challenge 1 (200 XP)

Delicate Clockwork. A glitterman is deathly vulnerable to salt water. If doused with 1 gallon or more of salt water, it takes 2d6 acid damage and is paralyzed for 1d3 rounds.

Obedient. The glitterman is magically bound to an Artificer sigil, and is compelled to obey simple orders given by anyone holding and attuned to its sigil. It obeys such orders to the best of its abilities, even if an order would result in its destruction.

ACTIONS

Multiattack. The glitterman makes two melee attacks.

Slam. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +4 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 5 (1d6 + 2) bludgeoning damage.

ALEXEI HOLSTMANN

Medium humanoid (human), lawful evil

Armor Class 13

Hit Points 32 (5d8 + 10)

Speed 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
14 (+2)	16 (+3)	15 (+2)	11 (+0)	9 (-1)	13 (+1)

Saving Throws Strength +4, Dexterity +5, Wisdom +1

Skills Perception +1

Senses passive Perception 9

Languages Common, Barovian

Challenge 1 (200 XP)

Fancy Footwork. If Holstmann makes a melee attack against a creature, that creature can't make opportunity attacks against him for the rest of his turn.

Quick Combatant. Holstmann can use a bonus action to take the Dash or Disengage action.

ACTIONS

Multiattack. Holstmann makes one melee attack and one ranged attack.

+1 Scimitar. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +6 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 7 (1d6 + 4) slashing damage.

Vicious Hand Crossbow. *Ranged Weapon Attack:* +5 to hit, range 30/120 ft., one target. *Hit:* 6 (1d6 + 3) piercing damage, or 13 (1d6 + 10) piercing damage if Alexei rolls a 20 on the attack roll.

BOBBY

CHARACTER NAME

ROGUE 1

CLASS & LEVEL

HALFLING

RACE

CRIMINAL

BACKGROUND

CHAOTIC GOOD

ALIGNMENT

SIMON

PLAYER NAME

STRENGTH
-1
8

DEXTERITY
+3
16

CONSTITUTION
+1
12

INTELLIGENCE
+1
13

WISDOM
+0
10

CHARISMA
+3
16

INSPIRATION

+2 **PROFICIENCY BONUS**

SAVING THROWS

- 1 Strength
- +5 Dexterity
- +1 Constitution
- +3 Intelligence
- +0 Wisdom
- +3 Charisma

SKILLS

- +5 Acrobatics (Dex)
- Animal Handling (Wis)
- Arcana (Int)
- Athletics (Str)
- +5 Deception (Cha)
- History (Int)
- Insight (Wis)
- Intimidation (Cha)
- +3 Investigation (Int)
- Medicine (Wis)
- Nature (Int)
- Perception (Wis)
- +5 Performance (Cha)
- Persuasion (Cha)
- Religion (Int)
- +5 Sleight of Hand (Dex)
- +7 Stealth (Dex)
- Survival (Wis)

14 ARMOR CLASS

+3 INITIATIVE

25 SPEED

Hit Point Maximum **9**

CURRENT HIT POINTS

TEMPORARY HIT POINTS

Total **1d8** HIT DICE

SUCCESSSES

FAILURES

DEATH SAVES



NAME	ATK BONUS	DAMAGE/TYPE
Shortsword	+5	1d6 + 4 / P
Shortbow	+5	1d6 + 4 / P

RANGE: YOU CAN SHOOT YOUR SHORTBOW 80 FT., OR UP TO 320 FT. WITH DISADVANTAGE ON THE ATTACK ROLL.

SNEAK ATTACK: ONCE PER TURN, YOU DEAL AN EXTRA 1d6 DAMAGE WHEN YOU HIT A TARGET WITH A WEAPON ATTACK AND HAVE ADVANTAGE ON THE ATTACK ROLL, OR WHEN THE TARGET IS WITHIN 5 FEET OF YOUR ALLY THAT ISN'T INCAPACITATED AND YOU DON'T HAVE DISADVANTAGE ON THE ATTACK ROLL.

ATTACKS & SPELLCASTING

Lucky
WHEN YOU ROLL A 1 ON THE D20 FOR AN ATTACK ROLL, ABILITY CHECK, OR SAVING THROW, YOU CAN REROLL THE DIE AND MUST USE THE NEW ROLL.

Brave
YOU HAVE ADVANTAGE ON SAVING THROWS AGAINST BEING FRIGHTENED.

Halfling Nimbleness
YOU CAN MOVE THROUGH THE SPACE OF ANY CREATURE THAT IS OF A SIZE LARGER THAN YOURS.

Naturally Stealthy
YOU CAN ATTEMPT TO HIDE WHEN OBSCURED BY A CREATURE THAT IS AT LEAST ONE SIZE LARGER THAN YOU.

Criminal Contacts
YOU HAVE CONNECTIONS TO THE CRIMINAL UNDERGROUND IN DAGGERFORD AND WATERDEEP.

10 PASSIVE WISDOM (PERCEPTION)

LIGHT ARMOR, SIMPLE WEAPONS, HAND CROSSBOWS, LONGSWORDS, RAPIERS, SHORTSWORDS, THIEVES' TOOLS (DOUBLE PROFICIENCY BONUS), PLAYING CARDS.

LANGUAGES
COMMON, HALFLING

OTHER PROFICIENCIES & LANGUAGES

SHORTSWORD, SHORTBOW, BELL, LEATHER ARMOR, 5 CANDLES, THIEVES' TOOLS, BACKPACK, CROWBAR, HAMMER, 10 PITONS, LANTERN, FLASK OF OIL, TINDERBOX, COMMON CLOTHES, POUCH.

EQUIPMENT

FREEZO

CHARACTER NAME

WARLOCK 1

CLASS & LEVEL

HIGH ELF

RACE

ACOLYTE

BACKGROUND

NEUTRAL

ALIGNMENT

HINGERS

PLAYER NAME

STRENGTH
-1
8

DEXTERITY
+2
15

CONSTITUTION
+2
14

INTELLIGENCE
+1
13

WISDOM
+0
10

CHARISMA
+2
15

INSPIRATION

+2 PROFICIENCY BONUS

SAVING THROWS

- 1** Strength
- +2** Dexterity
- +2** Constitution
- +1** Intelligence
- +2** Wisdom
- +4** Charisma

SKILLS

- Acrobatics (Dex)
- Animal Handling (Wis)
- +3** Arcana (Int)
- Athletics (Str)
- Deception (Cha)
- +3** History (Int)
- +2** Insight (Wis)
- Intimidation (Cha)
- Investigation (Int)
- Medicine (Wis)
- Nature (Int)
- +2** Perception (Wis)
- Performance (Cha)
- Persuasion (Cha)
- +3** Religion (Int)
- Sleight of Hand (Dex)
- Stealth (Dex)
- Survival (Wis)

ARMOR CLASS: **13**

INITIATIVE: **+2**

SPEED: **30**

Hit Point Maximum **10**

CURRENT HIT POINTS

TEMPORARY HIT POINTS

Total **148** HIT DICE

SUCCESSSES: ○○○○

FAILURES: ○○○○

DEATH SAVES



NAME: **Longsword** ATK BONUS: **+1** DAMAGE/TYPE: **1d8 - 1 / S**

Spell attack **+4** **DC 13**

Shortbow **+4** **1d6 + 2 / P**

SPELL SLOTS: 1 X 1ST LEVEL

CANTRIPS: DETECT MAGIC, ELDRITCH BLAST, PRESTIDIGITATION

1ST-LEVEL SPELLS: COMPREHEND LANGUAGES, WITCH BOLT.

ATTACKS & SPELLCASTING

12 PASSIVE WISDOM (PERCEPTION)

SIMPLE WEAPONS, LONGBOW, SHORTBOW, LONGSWORD, SHORTSWORD, LIGHT ARMOR.

LANGUAGES
ELVEN, COMMON, DRACONIC.

OTHER PROFICIENCIES & LANGUAGES

EQUIPMENT

- CP: LONGSWORD, ARCANE FOCUS, SCHOLAR'S PACK, 2 DAGGERS, LEATHER ARMOR, PRAYER BOOK.
- SP: INCENSE STICKS, VESTMENTS, COMMON CLOTHES (BAKER'S OUTFIT), SHORTBOW, QUIVER, MANACLES.
- EP:
- GP:
- PP:

Fey Ancestry
ADVANTAGE AGAINST BEING CHARMED. CAN'T BE MAGICALLY PUT TO SLEEP.

Darkvision 60 ft.
SEE IN DIM LIGHT AS IF IT'S BRIGHT LIGHT, AND SEE IN DARK LIGHT AS IF IT'S DIM LIGHT.

Trance
DON'T NEED TO SLEEP; MEDITATE FOR 4 HOURS TO GAIN THE BENEFIT OF 8 HOURS OF SLEEP.

Archfiend Patron
YOU HAVE MADE A DEAL WITH AN EVIL DEMON THAT GRANTS YOU MAGICAL POWER.

Dark One's Blessing
GAIN 4 TEMPORARY HIT POINTS WHENEVER YOU REDUCE A HOSTILE CREATURE TO 0 HIT POINTS.

Pact Magic
YOU HAVE SPELL SLOTS AND CAN CAST SPELLS USING CHARISMA.

Shelter of the Faithful
YOU ARE A JUNIOR ACOLYTE OF A LOCAL TEMPLE, AND YOU AND YOUR ADVENTURING COMPANIONS CAN MAKE USE OF MODEST LODGINGS THERE.

FEATURES & TRAITS

THE CODEX OF THE INFINITE PLANES

Long ago the wizard-cleric who ruled the Isles of Woe lost in the Lake of Unknown Depths used this work to gain knowledge of great power. It is told that this arcane wisdom is what eventually wrought the downfall of the mage-priest and caused the waters to swallow his domain. In any event, the Codex of the Infinite Planes somehow survived the cataclysm, for the Wizard Tzoonk, before his disappearance, recorded the following:

“. . . and thereupon the voice belled forth in tones of hollow iron and spoke of the Coming of the City of the Gods. Such future events interested me not, so I gave the command: ‘Answer in th . . .’ (here the fragment becomes entirely illegible) . . . so knowing both the secret and the spell which would unlock the Way to this horde of the Demon Prince Nql . . . (another break in the writing unfortunately occurs here) . . . gathered the nine as required and proceeded forth. With me in addition were the dyoph servants necessary to transport the Code, for I would not leave it behind on even so perilous a journey as this.” (Here the entire fragment ends.)

From this, and vague rumors, it would seem that the Codex is of unusually large size for even so magical a tome as it is, and that it is difficult to transport. To open the book is to court instant death and total annihilation, for it is 99% certain to destroy those who dare to seek instant mastery of its contents. If any person under 10th level dare to even touch its cover it will slay him just as surely. The Codex has three powers from TABLE I, one from TABLE II, one from TABLE III, one from TABLE IV and two from TABLE V.

Suggested powers:

TABLE I: I-M, I-Z, and I-G
TABLE II: II-R
TABLE III: III-M
TABLE IV: IV-K
TABLE V: V-F and V-G

Actual powers:

THE HAND OF VECNA

The Hand of Vecna appears to be a dried, shriveled and blackened hand, such as could have been caused by having been burned. The hand (and it is also rumored in dark passageways, an eye) is the sole remains of an ancient lich who was so powerful that he was able to imbue his hand with wondrous/horrible powers and to enable it to survive even after his long-dead body had ceased to exist.

If the hand is pressed against the stump of an arm, the “wearer” is able to use its various powers, although he must determine them by trial and error. The hand causes the user to become totally evil, but even a “detect evil” spell will not reveal this. Once the hand is pressed to the stump of an arm, it affixes itself to the arm, and can only be removed under certain conditions. Until one of the “primary powers” (listed below) is used, the hand may be removed at will (of course, the user is still minus his normal hand). With each use of a “primary power,” the chance of removing the hand is reduced from 100% by 10%. After ten uses, the hand can **never** be removed. Secondary powers may be used as often as desired, without the drastic effects of use of primary powers. Each time a primary power is used successfully, the user is subject to one of the penalties listed in Table III of the ARTIFACTS & RELICS TABLES. NONE OF THE EFFECTS OF THE HAND MAY BE ALTERED IN ANY WAY, EVEN WISHES OR ACTS OF THE GODS ARE USELESS IN THIS REGARD.

The secondary powers include one from TABLE IV and four from TABLE I.

The “primary powers” are used by extending the fingers of the hand in different combinations. Use about sixteen combinations (i.e., clenched fist, index finger extended, all fingers extended, etc.) and have about six do nothing. Use ten powers from TABLE II and one from TABLE V. Also, the touch of the Hand of Vecna has the effect of one power from TABLE II.

Once again, nothing may alter the effect of the hand on the user!

Suggested powers:

TABLE I: I-A, I-O, I-L, and I-V

TABLE II: II-B, II-D, II-J, II-K, II-O, II-R, II-T, II-U, II-V, II-X, and II-Y

TABLE III: III-M

TABLE IV: IV-J

TABLE V: V-K

Actual powers:

THE EYE OF VECNA

It is also said, but not in the hearing of strangers, that when the mighty lich, Vecna, finally met his doom, that one of his eyes survived along with his hand. The eye may or may not have originally belonged to Vecna, as it is said to glitter much in the same manner as the eye of a feline. If the eye is pressed in the empty socket of a human’s head, it grafts itself to the head of the user and gives him remarkable powers!

Once placed, the eye cannot be removed, and it turns the user unalterably chaotic. The eye has three “secondary powers” from TABLE I and one from TABLE II, which can be used with no adverse effect on the user. However, the eye has one “primary power” from TABLE V which, when used, causes the user to suffer the effects of one of the powers from TABLE III.

THE EFFECTS OF THE EYE ON THE USER MAY NOT BE ALTERED IN **ANY** MANNER, EVEN BY WISHES.

Suggested powers:

TABLE I: I-D, I-N, and I-R

TABLE II: II-L

TABLE III: III-S

TABLE V: V-C

Actual powers:

BABA YAGA’S HUT

Somewhere there reportedly exists this relic of the greatest wizardess of all time, Baba Yaga. Her hut is a smallish-appearing hovel, about 10’-15’ in diameter, and it stands on but two strange stilts. The interior of this hut, however, is ten times the outer diameter, it is filled with rich furnishings and minor magical items, and its walls are equal to stone five feet thick. Furthermore, the stilts it stands upon are actually gigantic bird-like legs which can carry the hut over any sort of terrain — 36”/turn in wet places, 24”/turn on normal terrain, 12”/turn through forests, over rough and rocky ground or up or down mountainous land. The legs of the hut are able to deliver mighty blows to any intruder rash enough to come near without invitation. Each melee round the hut’s legs are able to strike once, with a 30% hit probability, doing from 3–24 points of damage. The Hut also has one power from TABLE IV.

Suggested powers:

TABLE IV: IV-H

Actual powers:

character under 11th level of experience who touches it, but those of 11th level or higher who make a saving throw versus magic can command the powers and effects of the Codex:

- 4 x I: _____, _____, _____, _____
- 4 x II: _____, _____, _____, _____
- 2 x III: _____, _____
- 2 x IV: _____, _____
- 2 x V: _____, _____
- 2 x VI: _____, _____

Note: When activating powers and effects, base their coming into play upon the progress of the character's perusal of the Codex.

Crown of Might: According to tradition, great items of regalia were constructed for special servants of the deities of each alignment when the gods were contending amongst themselves. Who amongst them first conceived the idea is unknown. The champion of each ethic alignment — Evil, Good, Neutrality — was given a *crown*, an *orb*, and a *sceptre*. These items have been scattered and lost over the centuries of struggle since they first appeared. These 3 complete sets bestow great powers, but even mere possession of a *Crown of Might* gives a character of the same ethos great benefits (if a character of another alignment touches such an item he or she takes 5-30 hit points of damage and must save versus magic or be instantly killed). The alignment of a *Crown* is determined as follows:

- 01-06 Evil
- 07-14 Good
- 15-20 Neutrality

While being worn, the *Crown* raises its wearer's level of experience by 1 and confers the following additional powers/effects:

	Evil	Good	Neutrality
2 x I:	_____	_____	_____
1 x II:	_____	_____	_____
1 x III:	_____	_____	_____

Should a character wearing a *Crown* touch an *Orb of Might* (q.v.) or a *Sceptre of Might* of a different ethos, he or she takes damage and must save as noted above, and if the saving throw is successful, 1 malevolent power from Table IV. will affect him or her. However, if the *Orb* or *Sceptre* is of the same ethos, the following extra powers (and effects) are conferred upon the possessor:

2nd Item of Set	Evil	Good	Neutrality
1 x I:	_____	_____	_____
1 x II:	_____	_____	_____
3rd Item of Set			
1 x I:	_____	_____	_____
1 x II:	_____	_____	_____
1 x IV:	_____	_____	_____
1 x V:	_____	_____	_____
1 x VI:	_____	_____	_____

Note: Each of these items is so similar in appearance to the other that examination will reveal no difference, and detection magically will not reveal their ethic alignment. Each *Crown* is a slender diadem of gold set with 3 precious stones of great size so as to bring 50,000 or more gold pieces if openly sold.

Crystal of the Ebon Flame: The origin of this artifact is entirely unknown, as is its exact whereabouts. It is a beautifully formed, diamond-hard mineral the size of a hand. When it is touched, the *Crystal* sends forth rays of light and a black flame seems to leap and dance in the heart of the jewel. All creatures within 30' must save versus magic or be charmed as if by a *fire charm* spell. The possessor of the *Crystal* may draw upon its powers by gazing at the *Ebon Flame* at its center. These powers and effects are:

- 4 x I: _____, _____, _____, _____
- 2 x II: _____, _____
- 1 x III: _____
- 1 x IV: _____
- 1 x V: _____
- 1 x VI: _____

Cup and Talisman of Al'Akbar: This pair of holy relics were given by the gods of the Paynims to their most exalted high priest of *lawful good* alignment in the days following the Invoked Devastation. It was lost to demi-human raiders and was last rumored to be somewhere in the Southeastern portion of the Bandit Kingdoms. The Cup is made of hammered gold, chased with silver filigree, and set with 12 great gems in electrum settings — a jewelry value of 75,000 or more gold pieces on the market. It does not radiate magic, but it has the following powers/effects:

- 4 x I: _____, _____, _____, _____
- 1 x III: _____*

The *Talisman* is made of hammered platinum, a star of 8 points, chased with gold inlays, and with a small gem tipping each point. The star is hung from a chain of gold and electrum set with silver beading (8 sets of 3 beads each) — a jewelry value of 10,000 or more gold pieces. It does not radiate magic either, but has the following powers/effects:

- 2 x II: _____, _____
- 1 x IV: _____**

If a cleric, druid, paladin, or ranger possesses both, he or she may fill the cup with holy water and immerse the talisman into the fluid to create a potion once per week. The potion will be:

- 1-5 *healing*
- 6-10 *extra healing*
- 11-15 *poison antidote balm*
- 16-17 *cure disease salve*
- 18-19 *remove curse ointment*
- 20 *raise dead balm*

And the possessor gains the following powers/effects from both:

- 1 x V: _____
- 1 x VI: _____

* For *neutral* or *evil* characters only.

** For *evil* characters only.

Eye of Vecna: Seldom is the name of Vecna spoken except in hushed voice, and never within hearing of strangers, for legends say that the phantom of this once supreme lich still roams the Material Plane. It is certain that when Vecna finally met his doom, one eye and one hand survived. The *Eye of Vecna* is said to glow in the same manner as that of a feral creature. It appears to be an agate until it is placed in an empty eye socket of a living character. Once pressed in, it instantly and irrevocably grafts itself to the head, and it cannot be removed or harmed without slaying the character. The alignment of the character immediately becomes *neutral evil* and may never change. The *Eye* bestows both *infravision* and *ultravision* to its host, and gives the following additional powers/effects:

- 2 x I: _____, _____
- 2 x II: _____, _____
- 1 x IV: _____
- 1 x V: _____

The minor or major powers may be used without fear of harm, but use of the primary power causes a malevolent effect upon the host character.

The Hand of Vecna: The arch-lich Vecna supposedly imbued both his hand (left) and his eye (see the foregoing listing) with wondrous and horrible powers enabling them to persist long after his other remains mouldered away into dust (Cf. *Eye of Vecna*). Tales say that the *Hand* appears to be a mummified extremity, a blackened and shriveled hand, possibly from a burned body. If the wrist portion is pressed against the stump of a forearm, it will instantly graft itself to the limb and become a functioning member with 18/00 strength in its grip (no "to hit" or damage bonuses). The *Hand* will eventually turn the alignment of the host character to *neutral evil* as explained hereafter.

The host character may use any minor power without fear, but as soon as a major power of the *Hand* is used, he or she awakes a spirit of great evil. (You, the DM, should then begin an insidious campaign of suggestion and urging towards evil on that character's part.) When a primary power is used, the host will instantly become *neutral evil* — very evil. The *Hand* can be severed from

the host at any time before its powers are used with 100% certainty, but each major power use subtracts 1% from the probability, and each use of a primary power makes success 10% less likely. Whenever 100% subtraction has occurred there is no possibility of removing the *Hand*, and the character will know this.

To use any power, the fingers of the *Hand* must be extended, curled, or whatever in different combinations. The powers and effects are:

- 10 x I: _____
- 5 x II: _____
- 2 x III: _____
- 2 x IV: _____
- 2 x V: _____
- 1 x VI: _____

Remember that NOTHING SHORT OF INTERVENTION FROM THE MOST POWERFUL OF GODS CAN ALTER THE EFFECTS OF VECNA'S HAND UPON ITS HOST, and it is urged that even the greatest of deities will be loath to attempt to undertake meddling with any host creature — so allow the effects to be irrevocable.

Note: Devise the combinations of finger/hand positions you have assigned to each power and record them, i.e. fist = (), thumb down = (), pointing little finger = (), etc. Keep this chart handy and make the host character use the positions to use a power of the *Hand*.

Heward's Mystical Organ: In the pages of the Fables of Burdock there is mention of a musical instrument of large size, an organ of such power that the mighty and terrible enchantments possible to cast by playing upon it are only hinted at. *Heward's Organ* has 77 great and small pipes, a console with many keys of black and white beneath 13 ivory stops, and 3 great foot pedals. The bellows which sends a rush of wind to the pipes is said to be worked by a conjured and chained air elemental of huge size. Each stop causes the pipes to sound in a different voice, while the keys vary the notes, of course. No one is certain what purpose the foot pedals serve. Despite the ravages of time which have silenced some of its pipes, and abuse and neglect which have supposedly made some keys and stops unworkable, the *Organ* can still work mighty magicks when properly played.

The would-be conjurer must be most careful, however, when attempting to work this relic/artifact, for pulling the wrong stops can cause the summoning of something undesired or the casting of the wrong type of spell. If the wrong keys are depressed — or the right ones are not — something called up might be unbound or the magic might backfire. Similarly, the alignment of the caster or manipulator of the *Organ* might be changed by improper playing.

After the powers and effects of the *Organ* have been determined by you, decide which stops and what key sequence/combinations will do what. (If you are conversant with musical notation, you can write tunes if you like, and make your players actually perform them on a piano or other instrument. Otherwise, pick some appropriate songs and give clues so that the player character can hum different ditties, i.e. "Fly Me to the Moon", "That Old Black Magic", "That Old Devil Moon", "You've Got Me in Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea", "The Monster Mash", etc.) The suggested powers and effects are:

- 7 x I: _____
- 7 x II: _____
- 3 x III: _____
- 7 x IV: _____
- 7 x V: _____
- 3 x VI: _____

Remember that effects can be negated, reversed, changed, etc. by misplaying the *Organ*.

Horn of Change: This ancient artifact exactly resembles any of the more common magical horns such as a *horn of blasting*, a *horn of bubbles*, etc. If it is winded 1 time, a power from Table I or an effect from Table III will occur. If the *Horn* is twice sounded, a power from Table II or an effect from Table VI will

occur. If 3 blasts are given, a power from Table V or an effect from Table IV will occur. You must determine the probability of a power or effect. 75%/25% is suggested and then dice for a random result on the appropriate table. Results which are inappropriate should be ignored.

Invulnerable Coat of Arnd: The High Priest Arnd of Tdon is said to have been the original possessor of this relic. The Coat is a bright and shimmering shirt of fine and almost weightless chain links. It covers the upper arms, torso, and groin of any human-shaped wearer of from 3' to 8' height, and makes the wearer totally invulnerable to physical attacks with respect to covered areas and gives AC 5 protection to all other areas. In addition, the *Coat* adds +5 to saving throws as if it were +5 magic armor, protects its wearer from fire as if it were a *ring of fire resistance*, and acid, cold, and electrical attacks have no effect upon the wearer. Additionally, the *Invulnerable Coat of Arnd* has the following powers/effects:

- 3 x I: _____
- 2 x II: _____
- 2 x III: _____
- 1 x IV: _____
- 1 x V: _____
- 1 x VI: _____

Iron Flask of Tuerny the Merciless: This artifact is reported to be a small and heavy urn, easily carried in a pack or by hand despite its weight. The Flask is stoppered with a turnip-shaped plug, engraved and embossed with sigils, glyphs, and runes of power so as to contain the spirit therein. The possessor need but know 3 words to have the *Flask* function properly, i.e. the word of OPENING, the word of COMMAND, the word of CLOSING AND SEALING. *Tuerny's Flask* is rumored to imprison one of the following:

- a greater devil
- a groaning spirit
- a major demon
- a night hag
- a nycadaemon

It is generally conceded that the Servant of the *Flask* can be loosed only to perform evil deeds, and it must always kill before it can be commanded to return to its prison. In addition to the Servant, the *Flask* has the following powers/effects:

- 3 x I: _____
- 1 x III: _____
- 1 x V: _____
- 1 x VI: _____

Jacinth of Inestimable Beauty: It is said that the finest corundum gem from the heart of the largest mountain was taken and fashioned by the gods themselves to form the *Jacinth of Inestimable Beauty*. This huge, priceless fiery orange jewel is indescribably beautiful and exquisitely cut in dozens of facets which shoot forth brilliant beams, and all who see it within 20' or less must save versus magic or be charmed by it. Legend relates that the *Jacinth* was possessed by the fabled Sultan Jehef Peh'reen for a time and then passed into the Land of Ket and southward into Keoland (see **THE WORLD OF GREYHAWK**), where all trace disappeared. When the possessor firmly grasps this lustrous orange gem, the following powers/effects are gained:

- 2 x I: _____
- 2 x II: _____
- 1 x III: _____
- 1 x IV: _____
- 1 x V: _____
- 1 x VI: _____

Johydee's Mask: The high priestess Johydee supposedly tricked the powers of evil into making this strange artifact and then wisely used it to overthrow their hold upon her nation. The *Mask* completely covers the wearer's face and enables him or her to assume the likeness of any human or human-like creature. It also prevents all forms of mind contact, detection or attack. *Johydee's Mask* is rumored to give the wearer total immunity to all gaze attacks (basilisk, catoblepas, medusa, etc.) and the following powers/effects:

- 2 x I: _____
- 1 x II: _____
- 1 x VI: _____



Paint by Numbers: Troll on the Loose

Master painter Daniel Gelon takes inspiration from nature as he tackles the unpainted troll from Nolzur's Marvelous Minis...

Of all the truly iconic D&D monsters, the troll will always stand out for me. I was twelve when my D&D group faced our first troll way back in first edition. It emerged from a swamp and took us by surprise, and we had no clue at that point about its weakness to fire or its regeneration ability. By the time we fled our group had another first—one of our party members was dead. When I saw the new troll mini based on the fifth edition troll I had helped to concept, I knew I had to paint it and unleash it upon my group.

I want to use this mini on my gaming table as a boss monster and since it's going to be a solo creature it should be nicer than a standard tabletop figure. But he's not going to get a *lot* of use, so I don't want to take the time to make it as nice as a show piece, as I would for a campaign's main villain. Total painting time will therefore be between four and six hours.

Thanks to the troll's size it has plenty of large, low-detail surfaces, so

I'm thinking about adding interest to them by creating multicolor transitions. I'm planning on using mostly a wet blend technique on the entire model.

Prepping the Miniature

The troll is part of the **Nolzur's Marvelous Minis** unpainted line of Dungeons & Dragons miniatures from WizKids. They have a lot of sharp detail and dynamic poses, plus they come pre-primed. They also have the added benefit of being well priced, so I found very little downside to adding one to my collection.

One of the selling points of pre-print miniatures is that they are ready for painting right out of the package with no prep work. Although I could have started the troll right off, there were a few mold lines that I thought would detract from the final model. Mold lines occur where two parts of the mold come together and a tiny amount of extra material seeps into the space between the two mold halves. There were also some tiny gaps where separate parts of the model were glued together.



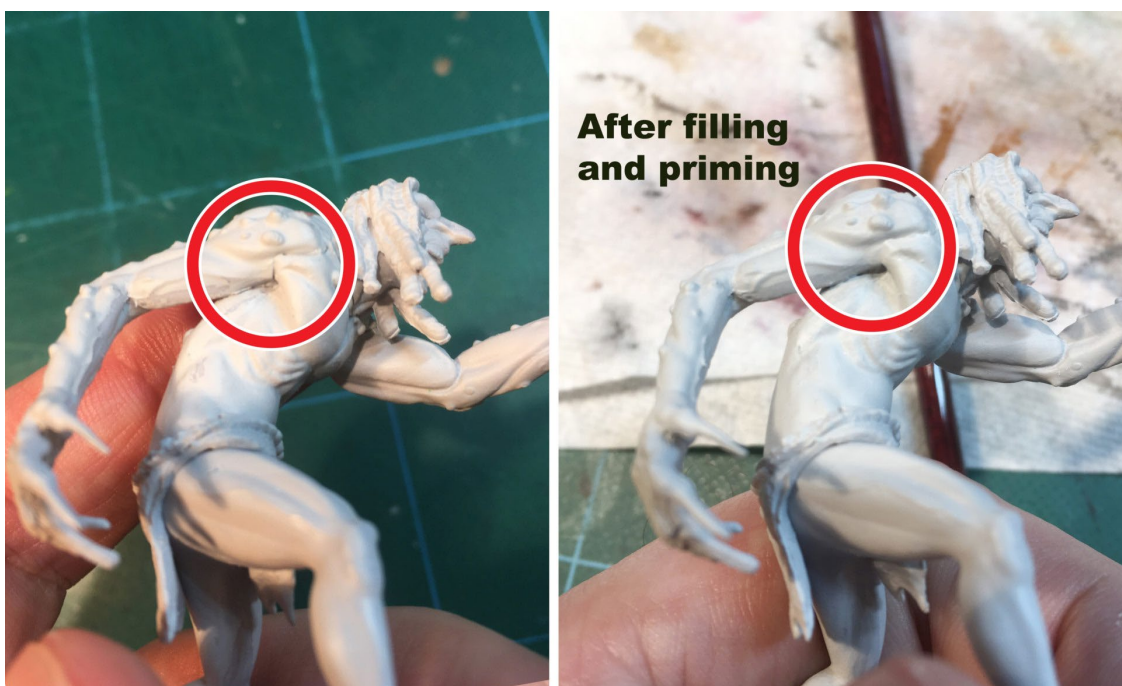
(Select to view)

Removing the seam lines makes painting easier and helps the final model look cleaner. They are easy and quick to deal with. With the tip of a sharp hobby blade I lightly scrape down the seam until it is smoothed out. If the seam is high or the seam offset is at different heights you can gently slice off some material to even the area.



(Select to view)

There are some sculpted veins on the troll's arms and legs that I had to be careful not to scrape away. To get its dynamic pose, the troll was molded in several parts. When assembled, the way the parts fit together left tiny gaps where the arms and head were glued on. I could putty the gaps but since they are so fine I'm going to fill them with some bottled acrylic matt varnish. Matt varnish is usually used to give your miniature a final protective coating but when painted onto the cracks, it will fill them and dry clear.



**After filling
and priming**

(Select to view)

The scrapped seams and the varnished areas are small enough that I could paint right over them with little worry about paint adhesion. However, to make sure the surfaces all appear the same I'm going to touch up the bare patches with some brush-on Vallejo grey surface primer. This is the same primer that the miniature was originally primed in. I'm now ready to start painting the troll.

Thinking About Colors

Through the years D&D trolls have come in a variety of colors—from the classic green to grey and the blue/white of an arctic troll. I wanted a classic green troll but not one in the cucumber or yellow green I usually see them in. For inspiration in choosing colors the real world is filled with wondrous combinations, so I let nature be my guide. Due to the nodules on the troll's back and their “swampy” nature, I thought looking at frogs was a natural place to start.



(Select to view)

After some image searching on frog coloration, I found an image of baby bullfrogs that inspired me. The greens were warmish but not yellowish with just a hint of grey. Their bellies had a slight bluish tint to them that I wanted to match on the troll. When I selected my paints I was thinking of these colors. Yet while the frogs had a lot of patterning on them, traditionally trolls don't, so I decided not to add any.

Getting a solid clean base of color on the miniature is perhaps the most important step in a well painted miniature. Luckily this step is easy even for novice painters, with a little patience.

The goal is to get an even, solid coat of color on the entire miniature, being careful to have clean color separations on the areas where those colors touch. Model paint out of the bottle can be thick or thin. Thick paint will cover better but will leave brush marks or clump up,

whereas thin paint does not cover very well but applies smooth. To get the coverage I need I'm going to paint several thin layers until it makes a nice layer of smooth paint. I add water to my paint until it's the consistency of cream.



(Select to view)

I finish each color completely before moving onto the next. I start with the belly color, which is an equal mix of Reaper's Master Paint Series 09063 Ghost White and 09150 Bloodless Skin. Next I apply a skin color made of equal parts of Reaper's Master Color Series 09149 Moldy Skin and Vallejo's Model Color 70967 Olive Green. The leather loincloth is a two-to-one mix of Reaper's Master Color Series 09028 Muddy Brown and Vallejo Model Color 70914 Green Ochre. The rope is just Reaper's Master Color Series 09257 Blond Hair and the troll's hair is straight Vallejo Model Color 70896 Extra Dark

Green. For the base, I use straight Reaper's Master Color Series 09028 Muddy Brown. The fingernails and toe nails are painted Vallejo's Model Color 70917 Beige. To finish him off I paint the mouth/teeth/tongue with a three-to-one mix of Reaper's Master Color Series 09135 Carnage Red and pure white.



It takes several coats to get a flat even color. This is the coverage after a single coat.

(Select to view)

Although the troll is a bit plain at the moment, I could simply paint in the teeth in the same color I painted the nails and give him a quick dark wash with diluted paint to make him look a bit more like a pre-painted miniature. However, I want to make him more impressive, with some nice color transitions between the belly and his green skin, which I'll accomplish with some wet blending.



(Select to view)

The Belly Transition: Wet Blending The Edges

There are many techniques to painting miniatures. I could use a series of semitransparent layers of color built up to create a very smooth transition, but for a figure that is going to infrequently appear on my gaming table I don't want to take the hours to accomplish this effect. Instead, I am going to wet blend the paint directly on the miniature by taking a mix of the two colors and painting a strip of that color right on the line where the two colors transition on the model. Then with

a brush lightly loaded with one of the base colors I'm going to feather that color into the wet strip of paint. To help in this process I'll be adding Reaper's Master Color Series 09216 Drying Retarder to the colors, so I have some extra time to blend them together without them drying.



(Select to view)

On my palette I have my skin color and my belly color with a transition of the two colors mixed between them. I've also added in just a few drops of the retarder to each color.



(Select to view)

After the belly is done I use the same process to the inner arms and the inner thighs.

I want to add just a touch of interest on the flanks so taking my belly color I paint over the transition on either side of the

belly and add some frog-like spotting.

Applying a Wash

I'm adding a slightly darker wash on the figure just to help define the forms I'm blending. The wash will also add just a little shadow tone on the undersides. For the belly I'm using a one-to-three mix of Vallejo Model Wash 76-520

Dark Khaki green and 76-516 Grey. I'll be using this quite watered down.



(Select to view)

For the rest of the skin I'm taking an equal mix of Vallejo's Model Color 70967 Olive Green and 70893 US Dark Green then adding a bit of Vallejo's 70524 Thinner medium to make it flow easier and to become more translucent. The paint consistency should be very thin. If it's too thin, another coat can always be applied.



(Select to view)

For now I'm not touching the loincloth or base.

Further Wet Blending: Finishing the Skin

As I start this I'm going to think how light is hitting my model. I'll paint the areas where light is shining on it lighter, while the places the light is not touching it I'm going to leave as is. I look at the model from the top, what I can see is what I'll progressively blend lighter.



(Select to view)

Since the skin is now darker I'll blend back on the skin's base color, leaving the recesses untouched. On the shoulders, upper back, top surfaces of the arms, rear calf, forward thigh and the tops of the feet I wet-blend a color made of three parts of Reaper's Master Color Series 09149 Moldy Skin to one part Vallejo's Model Color 70967 Olive Green. In a smaller area on top of this blend I use the same color mixed three-to-one with Vallejo's Model Color 70806 German Yellow.

I don't want the skin to be yellow green, I just want to add a hint of warmth to it. Adding a little more of the German Yellow to this mix on the top of the nose and the highest points of the brow give it that extra warmth and subtly draw attention to the face. The belly I want kept in shadow but I use just a little of the belly base color to clean up the highest areas of his musculature.

The nodules on the back are first painted Olive Green, then in a smaller area I use that color mixed with a little of the Extra Dark Green that I used in the hair color.



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Hair, Face and Nails

I want to keep the rough-looking appearance of the troll's hair. I'm not going to worry if the edges blend smoothly, I just want to dab them with highlights at the highest points where the light would hit them. I'm using Vallejo's Model Color 70903 Intermediate Blue. I'm also adding some highlights to the hairdangling down either side of his face just to give them some further definition. Then more sparingly I'll be repeating this process with Reaper's Master Color Series 09149 Moldy Skin. I could have given them a black wash to add some more depth to the hair but I feel it looks more matted without it.



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The mouth is next. I give it a wash using a three-to-one mix of Reaper's Master Color Series 09135 Carnage Red and pure black, then paint over the teeth with the Extra Dark Green.

Using an equal mix of the Carnage Red and pure white I add a highlight to the tongue. I paint in individual teeth using Vallejo's Model Color 70917 Beige. The eyes are painted pure black and a little dot of pure white is placed in the center of them. The last step is to add a little dot of pure white on the tops of the teeth.



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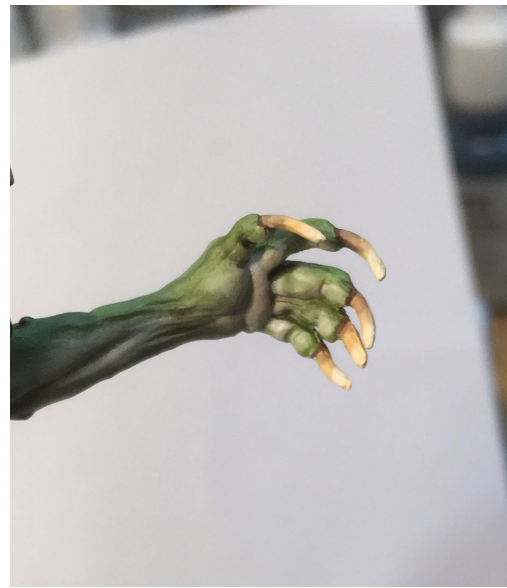
On the nails I wet blend an equal mix of Muddy Brown and Beige to Beige to pure white on the tip, then outline the base of the nail where it meets the finger in Muddy Brown.

Loin Cloth and Rope Belt

Like the rest of the model, the loin cloth is going to be wet blended.

The technique is the same as described previously and I'll go from a one-to-three mix of pure black and Muddy Brown to Muddy Brown to the loin cloth

base color, making sure I add some darks in the recess of the wrinkles. While it's still wet I'm going to stipple on some Green Ochre to add a bit more texture.



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For the rope I'll be giving it a wash of the pure black and Muddy Brown I used in the blending to pop the rope's detail. After the wash is thoroughly dried I'll be adding a single highlight of a fifty-fifty mix of the Blond Hair and pure white onto the top portions of the rope.



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Finishing the Base

The base is going to be wet muddy ground with standing pools of water so I'm not going to do much highlighting or shading. I'm going to do some splotchy wet blending using the Muddy Brown base

color with a little pure black added just to break up the surface color. I'm also going to stipple dirt in splotches on his ankles and feet to show he's been walking through the mud.

All my painting is now complete. Before the final step I give him several coats of Testors Dullcote Spray Varnish to seal the miniature and to help the paint from rubbing off with handling.

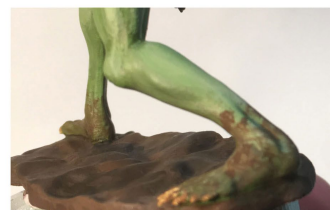
I apply some paint in gloss varnish to the mud splotches on the feet, the mouth, the finger nails, and to the edges of the base. On the base I apply Vallejo's Still Water. It's a thick self-leveling clear liquid that will pool in the base's indentations making little pools of water. When it's dry I glue the mini onto the supplied disc base.

Closing Thoughts

The troll was a blast to paint and I'm very impressed with the quality and detail of the Nolzur's line. The miniature did need a little extra prep work and the nails were a little thick and lumpy due to the molding process but with the excellent cost for such a large and impressive mini, this is a



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really minor complaint. I hope that anything I did here helps or inspires you to get out there and get painting. Here is the final troll.



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Force Grey Figures by Gale Force 9

Joe Manganiello is an actor, producer, director, published author,

Emmy winning narrator, and a lifelong D&D enthusiast. He's also a key member of Force Grey, the streaming team that counts Matt Mercer as its DM. Having previously been immortalized on a **fifth edition character sheet** you can download for your home game and in digital games such as *Idle Champions of the Forgotten Realms*, his character Arkhan has also now been cast in plastic by Gale Force 9. Manganiello spoke exclusively to *Dragon+* about capturing a moment in D&D history and seeing his dreams come to life.



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Did you have any input into the creation of Arkhan's miniature?

Joe Manganiello: I did. Arkhan was the home game character that I made it through *Tomb of Horrors* with and then over the years wound up using to test material for *Tomb of Annihilation* with Chris Perkins, *The Tower of the Curator* with Mike Mearls, and then eventually all of the Force Grey and *Critical Role* games with Matt Mercer and company. He even got married on an episode of *Nerd Poker* !

With all of that said, I have a very strong bond with this character that I created and developed, and as a result there are certain aspects of him that are very specific and have to be depicted a certain way. But there are a multitude of ways that I'm open to having him interpreted by other artists and I couldn't have been happier with the collaboration with GF9.

What specific character details did you want to see brought to life?

I sent a lot of key art and comps to John-Paul [Brisigotti, CEO at Gale Force 9]. I had ideas of how I thought his Tiamat emblazoned armor should look and I was also adamant about his body type and veering away from the typical dragonborn look. I wanted his head to resemble that of a dragon or half-dragon rather than the dragonborn aesthetic, and similarly I wanted him to have a tail.

What's it like to have a second version created with that Vecna upgrade?

Ha ha! John-Paul made me the Force Grey Arkhan figure for my run on *Critical Role* and little did he or anyone else know what I had planned for the end of episode 114! But it was absolutely beautiful because it meant that we got to dive back in and collaborate on another figure and an upcoming bust.

I'm really excited for this one because not only is it a mini figure of Arkhan, it actually represents a frozen moment in time. If you look at the base you will see Arkhan's freshly severed hand lying on top of his shield in a pool of blood. The new Arkhan mini is cast at exactly the moment when he chopped his own hand off and replaced it with the *Hand of Vecna*, just before he teleported away from Vox Machina after the Vecna Battle. It's a mini that represents a historical moment in D&D cannon.

As Alcide in True Blood and Deathstroke for DC you've already been immortalized in plastic. How does this figure rate alongside those?

Those other times I was playing a character that was cooked up in someone else's mind, but Arkhan is from mine. I can't thank John-Paul and the team at Gale Force 9 for literally making one of my dreams a reality. This is pretty sweet!

Gale Force 9's Force Grey figures are released in late July 2018 and have an MSRP of \$40. They are available for pre-order at the [Gale Force 9 website](#).

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Building a Fighter in Dragonfire

Randall Bills, Managing Developer at Catalyst Game Labs, provides tips on creating a powerful Fighter in deck-building game *Dragonfire*.

Staying true to the spirit of Dungeons & Dragons, co-operative deck building card game *Dragonfire* pits two-to-six adventurers against ‘Encounters’ decks, which play the part of the Dungeon Master. As with the D&D tabletop RPG, there’s a wider mission to accomplish, decided by one of the Adventure cards. That might be a standard dungeon crawl, an operation to safeguard a noble, or an assignment to retrieve an item.

To get a feel for the game, watch Geek & Sundry host Becca Scott run through *Dragonfire*’s mechanics in her How To Play video.



Having shown us how to **build a cleric using Life Domain options** last issue, Catalyst Game Labs' Randall Bills explains the deeper strategy of creating a Fighter.

Doing it in Style

In the previous Cleric article, we mentioned the sheer volume of Features available for building up your character once you've acquired the XP you need to really start bringing that added power. However, that was tempered with knowing there's only three sheets of Features for players trying to focus on Devotion. For the Martial character, however, there are six sheets of options: twenty-four Features, made all the more fun thanks to a variety of great Fighting Styles.



The first *Dragonfire* release has an MSRP of \$59.99 and contains five Encounters decks, Market and Magic Items decks, Character and Adventure cards, an Adventure booklet, sticker sheets, tokens, plastic clips, and a rulebook.

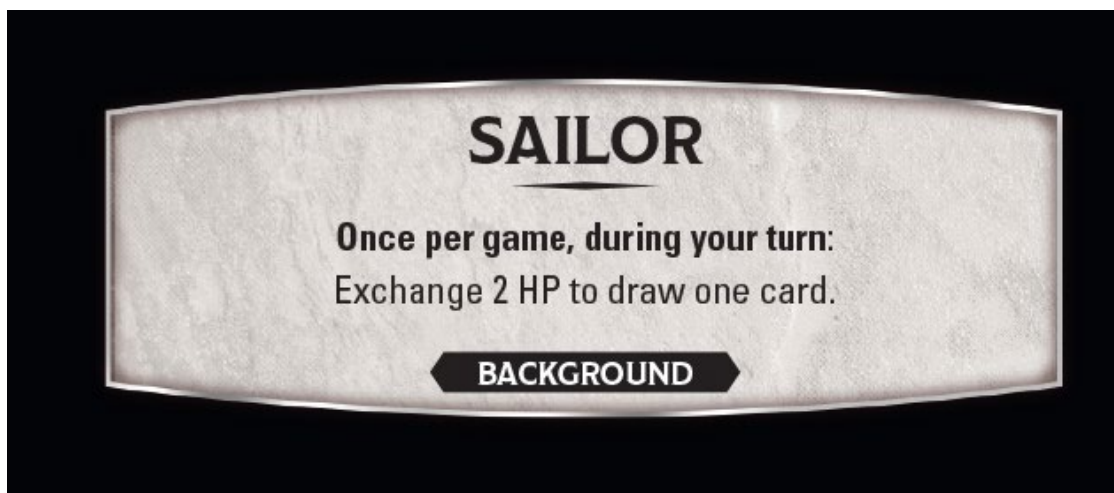
[LEARN MORE](#)

Let's dive in and take a look at a few possible builds for the all-

important meat shield in the party.



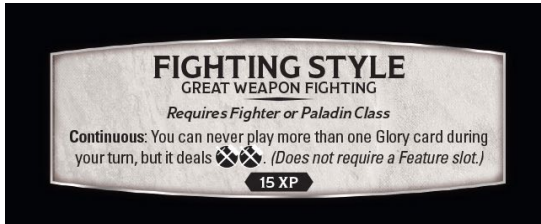
The five card-starting hand of the Sun Elf Fighter is incredibly powerful, so if you want out-of-the-gate tempo, it's hard to go wrong there. However, among the base game's Fighters, We love the Half-Orc. You trade out one starting card for 2 more HP and one additional Glory card! Not to mention, since it's the Fighter's job to take the pounding, Relentless Endurance is a great ability to keep you kicking even as you're going down.



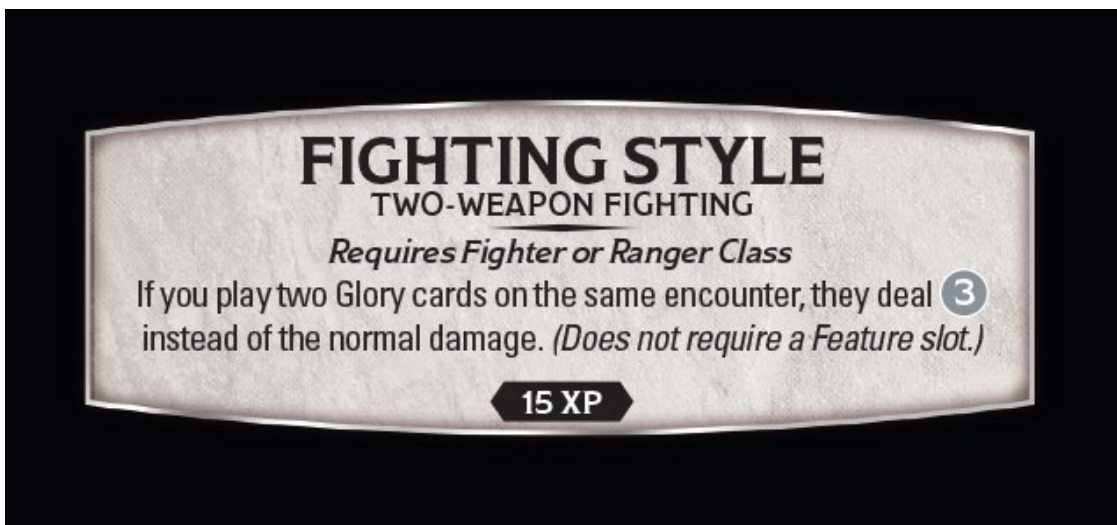
Several Background Features can also be useful for a Fighter and one slightly different route is the Sailor. Since Background Features can only be used once a game, and the Half-Orc Fighter has 10 HP—plenty to spare at the start of an Adventure!—paying 2 HP for one card draw at the right moment during Scene One can really help that all-important game momentum.

Next, remembering our jaunt down the Cleric path, you start with some great generic Features as you accrue XP. Any Feature that simply boosts your starting stats is always welcome, including increases of cards, gold, or HP. As with the Shield Dwarf from that

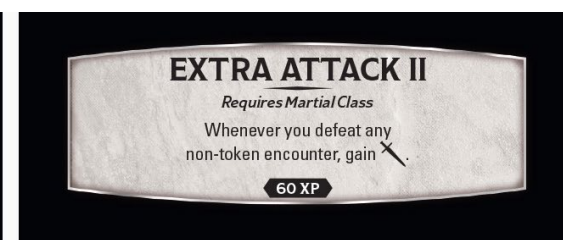
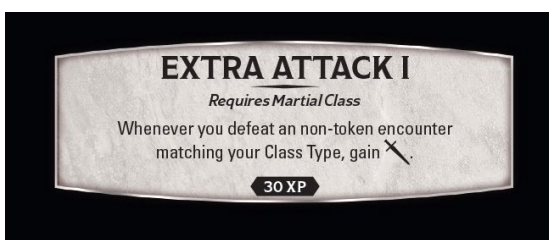
Cleric article, you can also grab racial-specific Features, such as Constitution for boosting HP. While that might be a tempting route to take, the Half-Orc already has a ton of HP, so let's choose another one instead.



Honed, at 15 XP, offers a great opportunity to throw a little extra damage on a turn—but only when you play one card, so you need to set yourself up for it. You can then take that up a notch by paying an additional 15 XP to add Fighting Style: Great Weapon Fighting. When you've set yourself up for that single-card play, these two Features work wonderfully together for a solid punch.



Another generic Feature and Fighting Style combo that works well together is Double Move (30 XP) and Fighting Style: Two-Weapon Fighting (15 XP). Two Basic cards gets you 4 damage! That's a fantastic combo that you should be able to achieve at least once a Scene, if you work at it.



Beyond the generic Features and the Fighting Styles, several additional Martial Features can provide some great extra flexibility in your build. Martial characters are the only ones that can make use of Sword icons. Even better, gaining an extra Sword when you defeat a Martial encounter can be handy, such as the 30 XP Extra Attack Feature. Then, if you gather an additional 60 XP for Extra Attack II, any encounter defeated will give you a Sword, not just Martial ones. And if you've put together a good hand of Martial cards—*Command Presence* and/or at least two *Javelins*—you'll draw an extra card often, which really fires up the pain the Fighter can bring to the table.

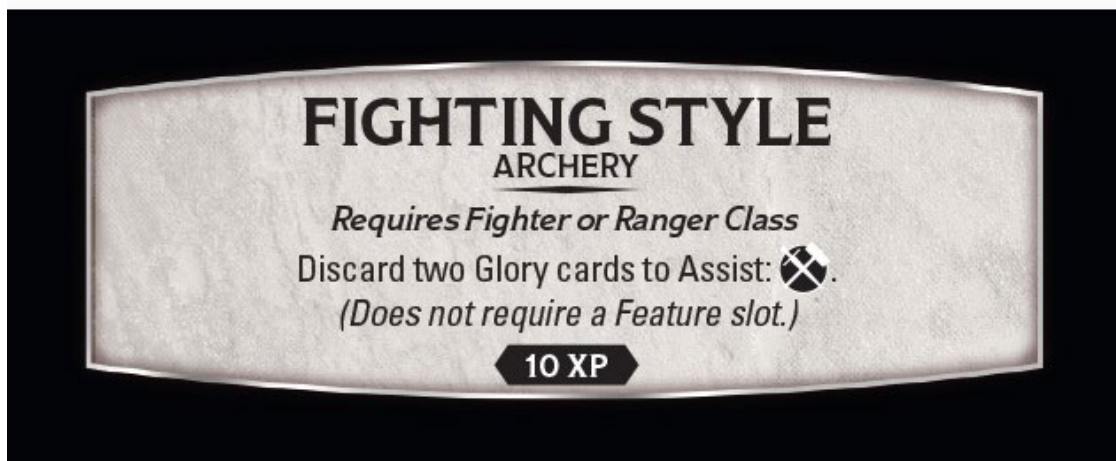
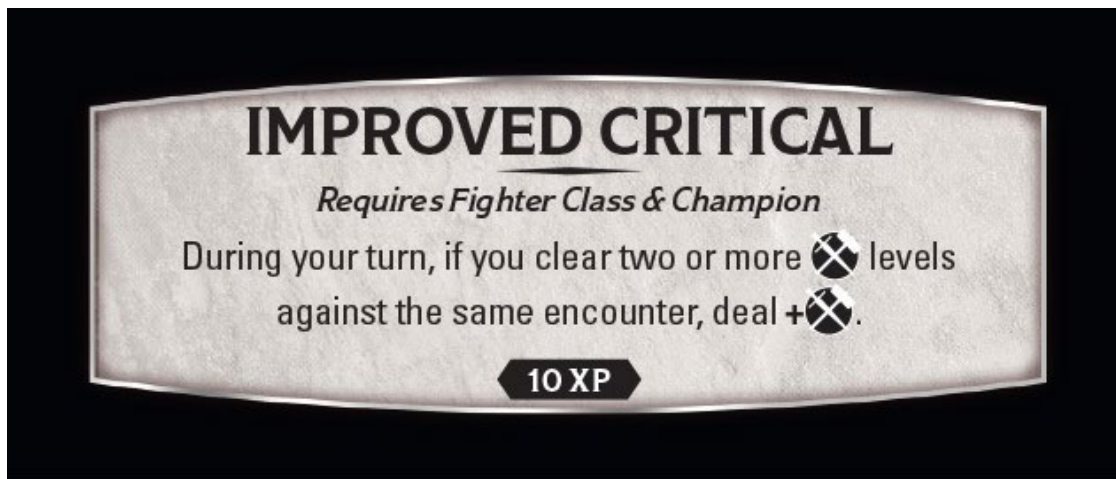


Now let's dive into the Champion Subclass, at 20 XP. You add in another *Glory*, which you can use to great effect with several Features noted above. To do that, you have to remove another card, though. And yes, you can remove a *Glory*. But why waste that extra card, especially when most Fighting Styles use them? Instead, look at the party, see who has the most cards of the other three colors, and remove one of those.



Once you reach the 120 XP range, some powerful additional options open up. Normally you can only have one Fighting Style, but Additional Style at 30 XP unlocks two. And if you're keeping Double Move (30 XP) and Fighting Style: Two-Weapon Fighting (10 XP), then adding Additional Style for 30 XP would let you add Fighting

Style: Dueling for 10 XP. (Remember, a Fighting Style doesn't require a Feature slot!) This build gives you brilliant flexibility to focus on a single encounter or split damage across multiple encounters—whatever a given round requires.



Another great build at even higher XP levels includes Champion at 20 XP, Improved Critical at 10 XP

(+5 for the second slot), Extra Attack III at 100 XP (+10 for the third slot), and Fighting Style: Archery at 10 XP (remember, no slot cost), for a total of 155 XP. This can make you a dangerous Assist machine if you get your hands on two or three *Javelins*. Toss two *Javelins* and discard two Basic cards, and you've got three Martial damage and two colorless damage, which should allow you to not only clear two or more Martial levels (giving you another Martial damage from Improved Critical), but should also lead to a defeated encounter when combined with the cards from the active player.



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This then triggers your Extra Attack III, and you immediately draw a card since you now have more than three Sword icons, which might just bring your Tower Shield into play, and if you play that as an Assist, you've now got six Sword icons. Time to draw another card! And working towards that type of power on another player's turn could clear two or even three different encounters.

Ah, Magic Items. So much potential here once you're at 100+ XP and starting to snag some Rares. Not that Commons and Uncommons aren't useful, but Rares really start to bring the power. And hands down, one of the best Rares for a Martial player is the *Master's Longsword* +2. Two Martial and a colorless damage, and a Sword icon, to boot. Not to mention Repack!



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We did mention there was a pile of flexibility in the Martial Class, right? And despite the several builds discussed above, there are still further options in the

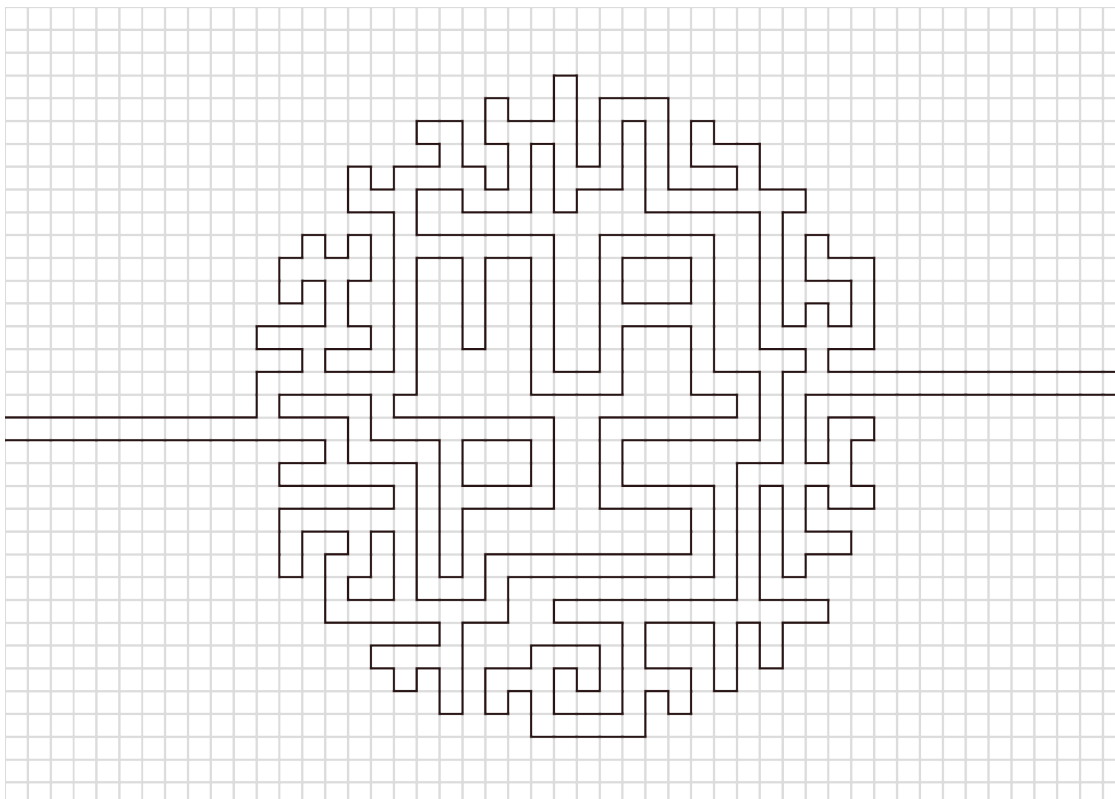
Champion Subclass that can take you in different directions than we have covered. And that's not even touching on the awesome fun of the Eldritch Knight Subclass! Hopefully this lets you see the potential for taking your Fighter where you want to go.

Randall N. Bills has lead the development and publication of hundreds of novels, sourcebooks, rulebooks, box sets, game aides and more. He's currently the Managing Developer for Catalyst Game Labs, overseeing the strategic development of the perennial BattleTech and Shadowrun properties, while managing the rollout of Catalyst Game Labs' new line of tabletop games, including core development of Dragonfire.

BACK TO TOP

Maps of the Month

Further maps from Tomb of Annihilation, plus a look back at Drizzt's past adventures!



*WARNING: THESE MAPS MAY CONTAIN SPOILERS FOR
BALDUR'S GATE: DESCENT INTO AVERNUS, EBERRON:
RISING FROM THE LAST WAR, AND EXTRA LIFE:
INFERNAL MACHINE REBUILD.*

At last, *Mordenkainen's Tome of Foes* is available! This issue, we wanted to offer maps that include caves, caverns, dungeons, and even buildings useful for encounters with the book's various creatures. Whenever possible, we also look to provide you with both tagged and untagged versions of these maps!

OUT OF THE ABYSS

Velkynvelve



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The Hook Horror Lair



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Sloobludop



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Neverlight Grove



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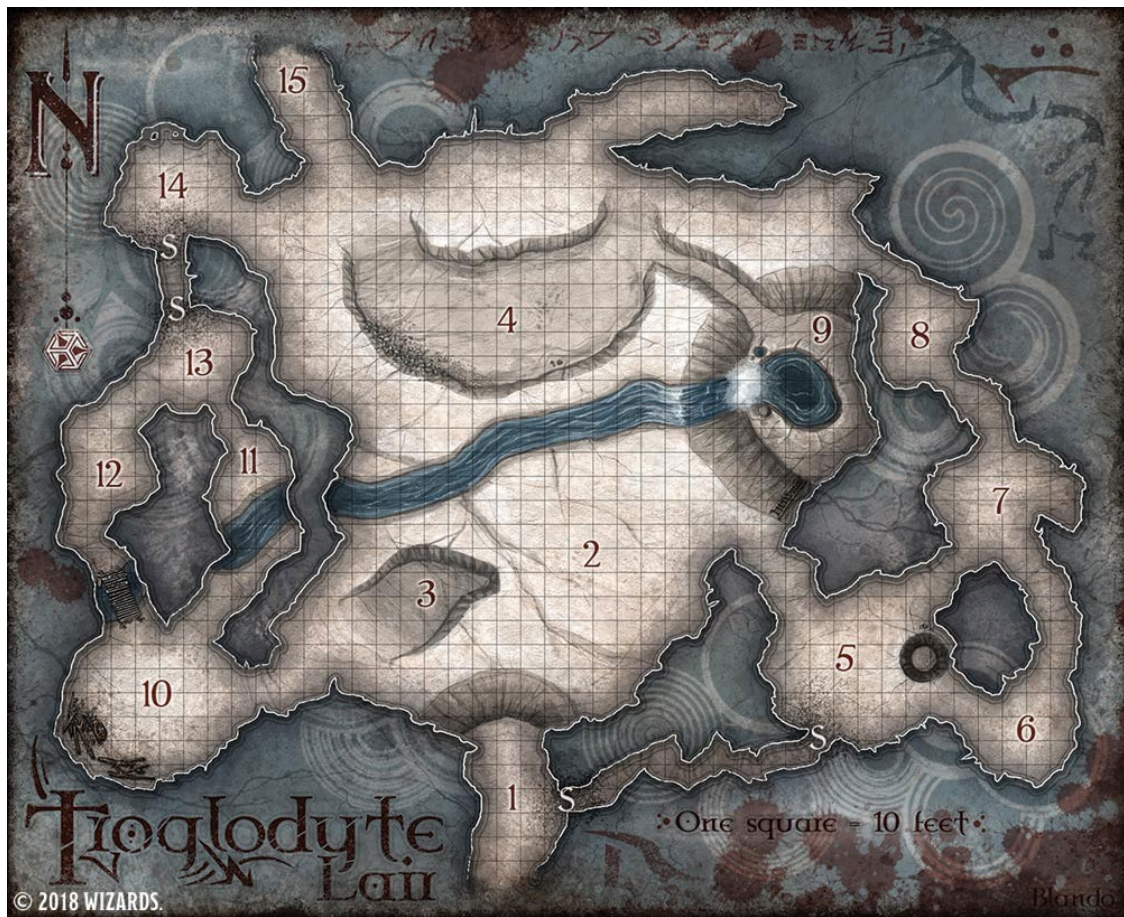
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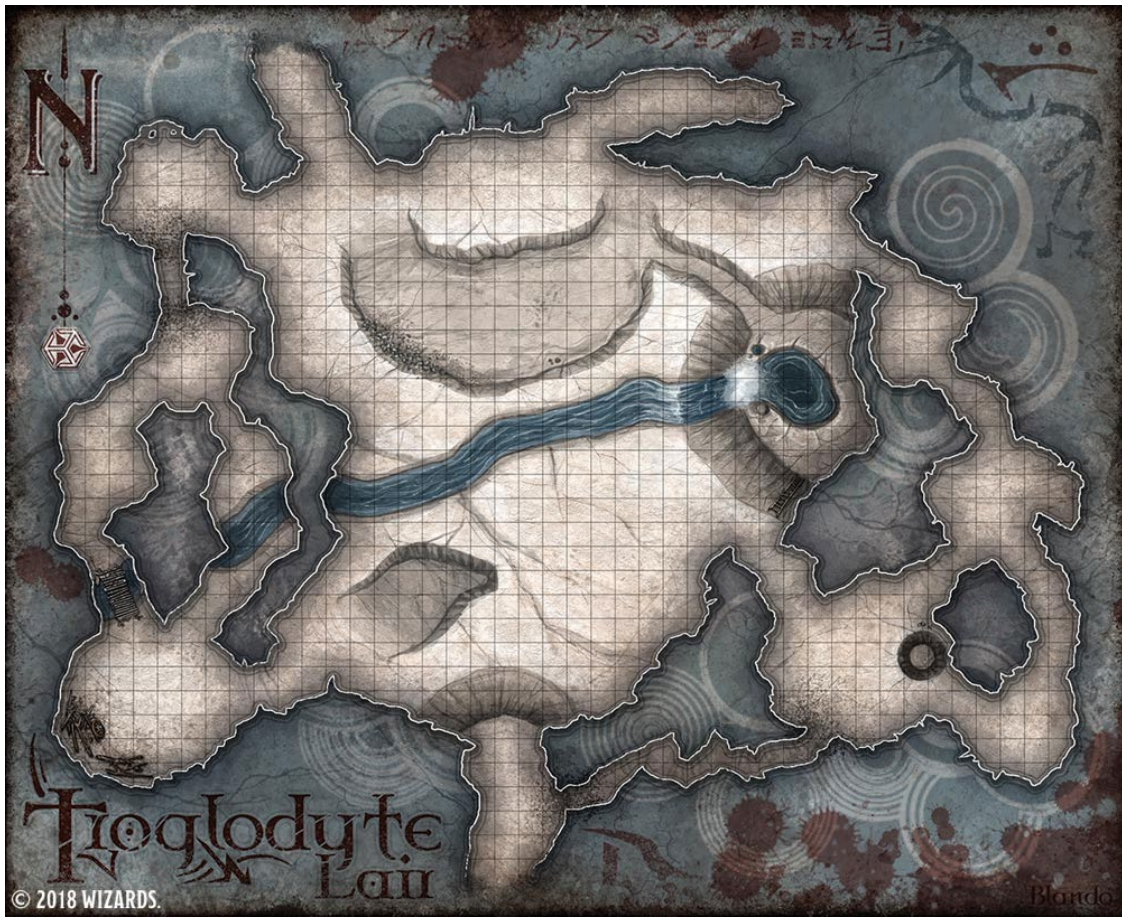
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Troglodyte Lair



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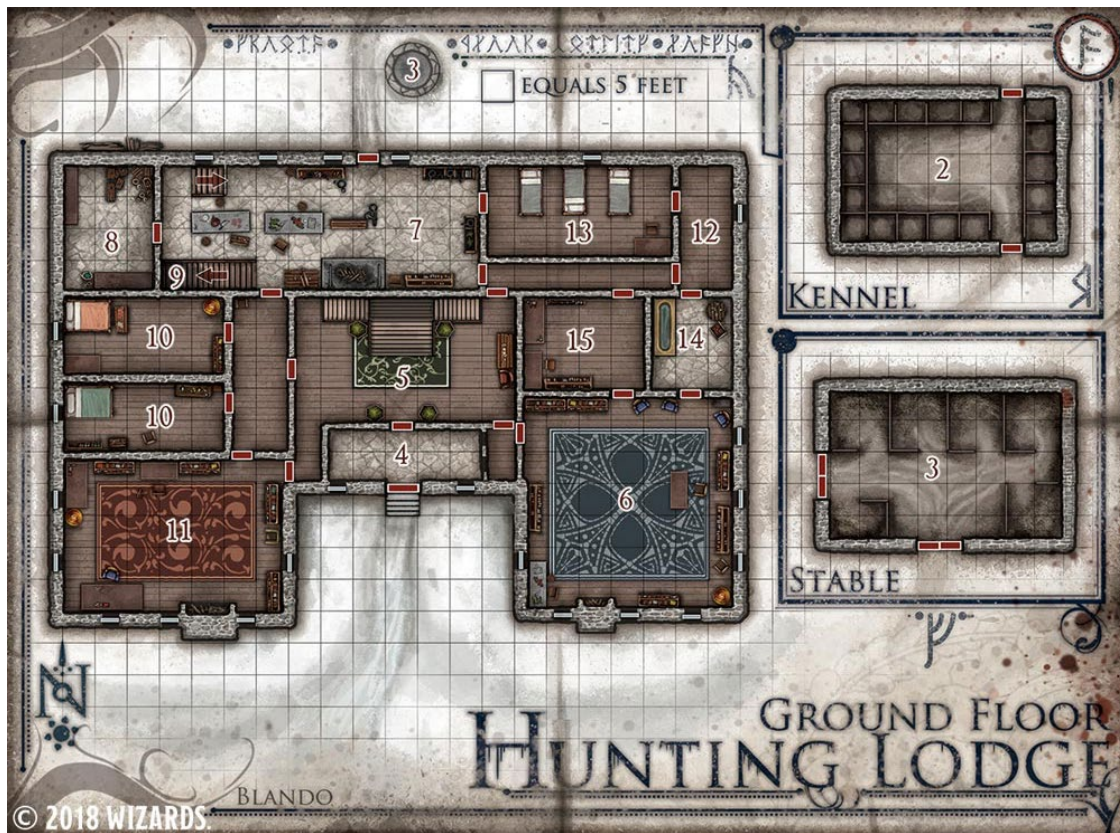


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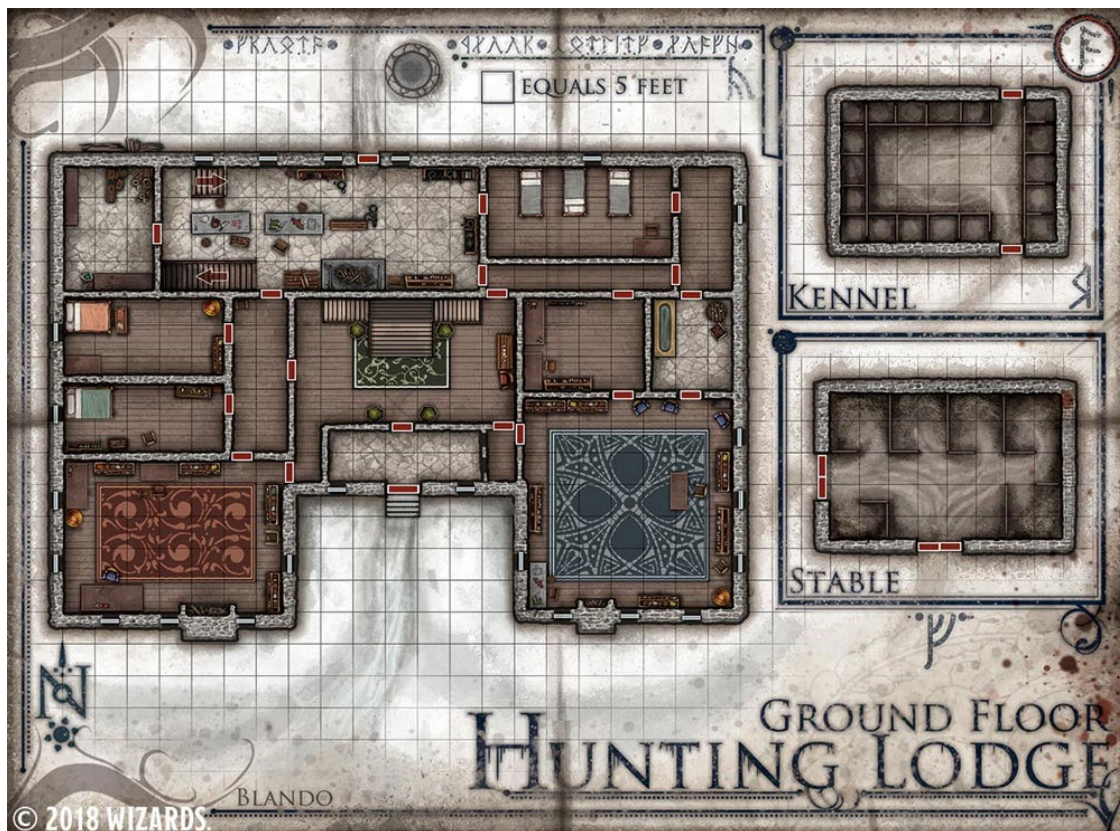
HOARD OF THE DRAGON QUEEN

Hunting Lodge: Ground Floor



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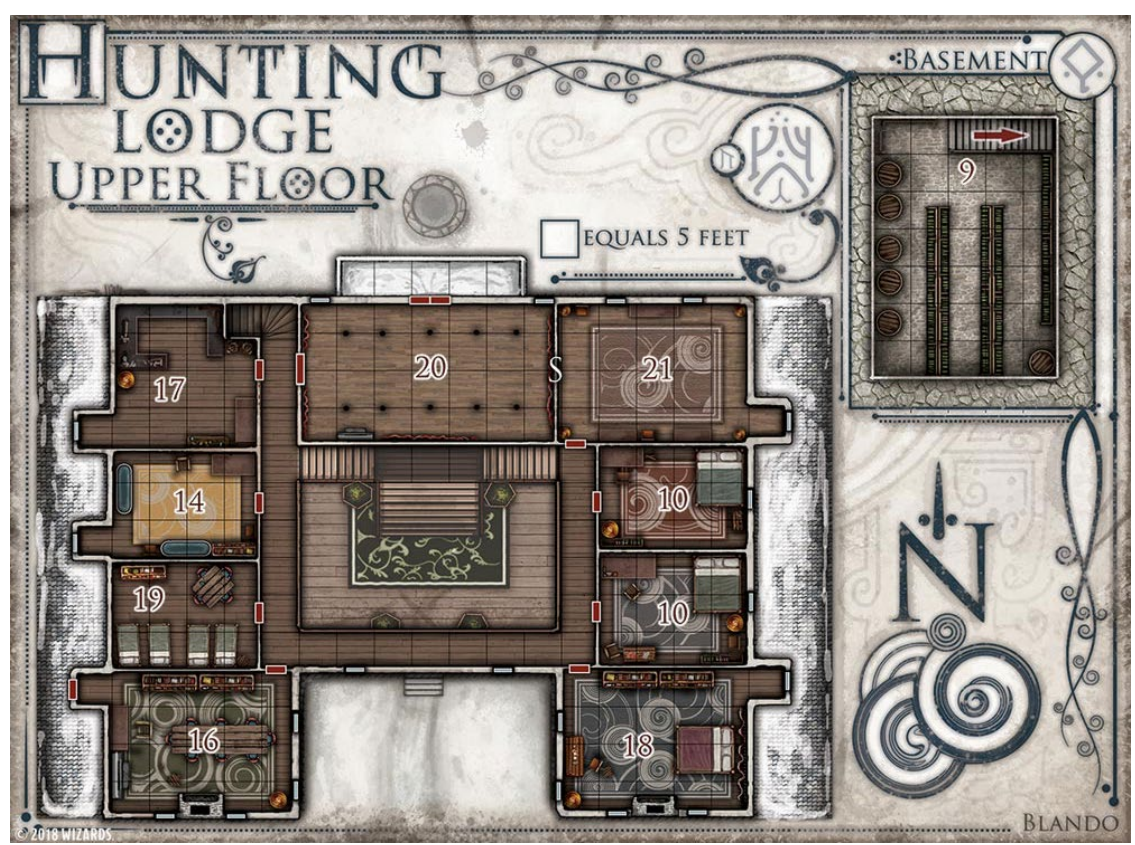
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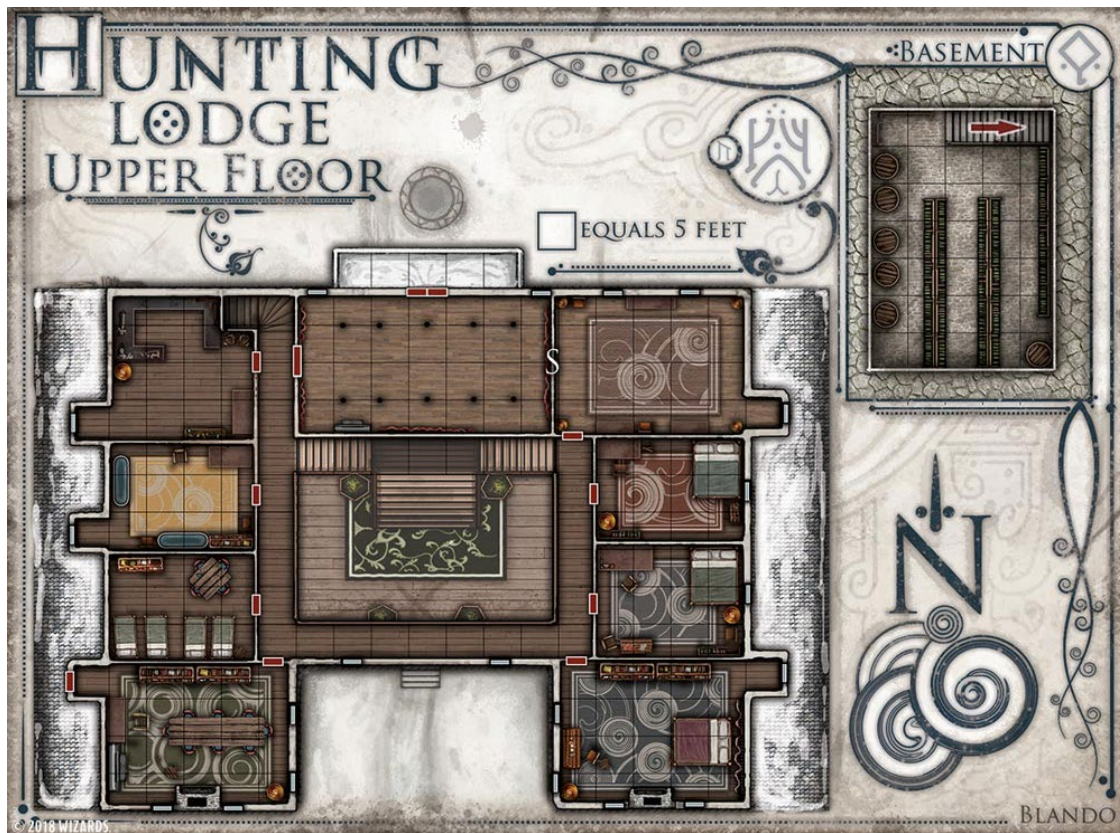
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Hunting Lodge: Upper Floor



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Digital Maps

Please note that *Out of the Abyss*, *Rise of Tiamat*, and *Hoard of the Dragon Queen* can both be found at [Fantasy Grounds](#) and the [Roll20](#) virtual tabletop. Look for these adventures available now!

Cartographers

And as always, our appreciation goes out to our amazing cartographers; this issue, these include [Jared Blando](#).

BACK TO TOP

The Best of the Dungeon Masters Guild

DMs Guild Adept Shawn Merwin looks at creators populating the continent of Chult and highlights design tips culled from other amazing campaign content.

Shawn Merwin



If you're interested in creating content for the DMs Guild, a great way of deciding what to work on is to look at which adventure types and topics are currently generating the most interest—and why. For example, the release of a new D&D storyline, such as last season's *Tomb of Annihilation*, always triggers a deluge of DMs Guild content

built to support it.

The *Curse of Strahd* led to countless products highlighting that nightmare realm, such as tomes of new undead creatures and adventures focused on gothic horror, while *Tomb of Annihilation* saw the number of supplementary products rise exponentially. The Guild Adepts also fulfilled their mandate of providing material to enhance campaigns in the lost jungles of Chult, as other creators also took up the challenge.

From a creator's point of view, this can be a good tactic, as the market for this kind of content spikes thanks to interest in the main storyline. Find a neat angle that ties into it, create good content in a reasonable time frame, and there will be an audience for your work. I did this with *Return of the Lizard King*, when I saw that *Tomb of Annihilation* would be enhanced by the addition of an easy-to-run, low-level adventure.

Some of the scenarios we look at today did the same thing. They offer great content for gaming enthusiasts who want more of what Wizards of the Coast is providing. This, in my opinion, is what the DMs Guild is all about: connecting motivated and imaginative creators with a fan base that craves more.

Creator Q&A

We caught up with prolific DMs Guild creator Jeff C. Stevens to talk about *Encounters in the Savage Jungles*, a collection of encounters and mini-adventures from more than a dozen different creators. Jeff chats about his gaming life and explains how to get involved if you are new to the Guild.

Tell us about your history with D&D?

My love of the game started when I was 11 years old, in 1982. I played a majestic fighter named Perseus—not because I knew mythology, but because I watched the movie *Clash of the Titans*. The game drew me in. I could be whoever or whatever I wanted to be!

My first regular D&D group consisted of me and my best friend Chris. Over time our group grew larger. We played at home but also

played at the **FLGS**. My summer vacations were spent at the store reading comics, playing games, and creating new D&D characters.

We played throughout high school, and I played infrequently in college. I took a hiatus from the game after that, returning with my brother Bryan and a group of his friends. I was reluctant to start again, since I was busy, but I'm so glad I did. We played a few sessions before fifth edition was released and then moved to the new system.

I'd never been a DM before, but I volunteered when we needed one. My first campaign was inspired by Metallica and Primus song titles: villains, locations, and events. I prepped a lot, and when I learned of the Dungeon Masters Guild, I thought I'd take my session notes and maps and publish them. I spent a lot of time on *The Throne of Bone* and *The House of the Midnight Violet*, tweaking and—unwisely—self-editing before I published them on the Guild. After those, I couldn't stop creating. I wanted to continue to share the stories in my head, share them with others, and fulfill my dream of becoming a published writer.

D&D has given me so much—both during my childhood and in my now adult life. I can't thank Gary Gygax, Dave Arneson and the current WotC staff enough for continuing to evolve the greatest roleplaying game ever.

***Encounters in the Savage Jungles* is the third in your series of Encounters products, which sees multiple designers all contributing to one product. What is attractive about this style of work as a creator?**

I can tap into the fantastic minds of other writers and showcase their individual styles. It makes putting together encounter supplements a lot easier in the writing process, and more enjoyable for the reader. Who wants to read 20 encounters by one person?

The coolest bonus is working with creators from all over the world! Each of the supplements have writing or art by creators from France, Brazil, UK, USA, Mexico, Peru, Australia, Poland, and Canada. This hobby is global, and I've developed friendships all over the world creating content for this great game.



Encounters in the Savage Jungles

5E
Supplement

Jeff C. Stevens

With: Tim Bannock, Casey Bax, Benoit de Bernardy, Chris Bissette, M.T. Black, Merric Blackman, Alex Clippinger, Wes Cordell, Elven Tower, Josh Kelly, Ginny Loveday, Jean Lorber, Tony Petrecca, Patrick E. Pullen, Matt Sanders, and Bryan Stevens



[LEARN MORE](#)

When I first found the DMs Guild, I immediately noticed products by MT Black and Tony Petrecca, both of whom are fantastic creators and have had a lot of influence on me. MT helped with my Guild career by giving advice and sharing feedback on my writing. He tops the list of fellow creators I'd like to meet one day.

Tony's *Journey Through the Center of the Underdark* amazed me, and I thought about creating something similar when *Storm King's Thunder* was released. I started, then realized it would be fun to include multiple authors. That's been the focus of the *Savage Encounters* line: to promote and showcase both established and up-and-coming creators.

With the success of *Savage Frontier*, I came up with the idea of *Savage Cities*. Again, I reached out to writers and was overwhelmed by the number who agreed to write for the project.

When *Tomb of Annihilation* was released, I started work on *Savage Jungles*. Chult is a large place and a lot can happen during that hex crawl. And, well... dinosaurs, undead, and jungles make for a great encounter recipe.

What are the biggest joys and the biggest challenges of creating a product with so many contributors?

The biggest joy is seeing the multiple facets of the project culminate into the final product. From reading the encounters, receiving the edited versions, commissioning the cover and internal art, seeing the maps develop, and then viewing the spectacular layouts that bring the writers' words to life, it's simply amazing.

The biggest challenge is production cost. Art, maps, writing, editing, layout, advertising—these are all costs. I mainly use Guild earnings to cover the production of new products, so I often have a project on hold while my royalties build. Once I have the cost of the next phase covered, I move on with production. And I forgot about time! I'm sure most of us wish we had more time for D&D but we have day jobs, other responsibilities, family and friends. I've spent many late nights and early mornings working on projects, but I love it!

How can people interested in contributing to a group project like this get involved?

Contact the producer or lead writer of the project. After *Savage Frontier* was released, I received emails stating, 'I'd love to be included as a writer if you do this again.' This not only gets your foot in the door, but it's also very flattering for the producer. I had a big smile on my face the first time I received that message. Someone liked what I produced, and they want to be a part of it!

If you have an idea, take the lead and start the project. You'll want to make sure you are organized from the start, which I wasn't when I first began.

I've learned a lot since *Encounters in the Savage Frontier*. The first thing I suggest is assigning monsters and areas to the writers. I didn't do this with *Savage Frontier* and ended up with encounters that involved similar creatures or events. If it's your project, do not stress about the deadline. Most of us create as a part-time job, and life often gets in the way. I check in with the various creators often, keeping tabs on writing or art progress, offering help if needed. Writers may need to back away from the project, so be prepared for that. I don't mind this—as I stated, life can get in the way, both for good and for bad.

As a D&D fan and creator I find social media to be a great way to follow the hobby and discover creators to follow. It's also how I find and communicate with most of the writers I work with. If you don't currently follow me on Twitter, you can find me at [@jcorvinsteven](#)s. Several Facebook groups and Goggle+ communities focusing on the DMs Guild also exist, bringing fans and contributors together.

Design Thought: Adventures vs Encounters

The D&D tabletop game attracts a diverse audience, so naturally they can be on the lookout for different types of products. Some DMs only have the time to run full adventures that provide them with everything they need. Other DMs never run a published adventure, but they love to take ideas from them to port into their own games. Books of encounters, like *Encounters in the Savage Jungles*, best fit the needs of the latter types of DMs.

However, it's important to understand the audience for your product when designing encounters, and how it is different from designing full adventures. If you under-design an adventure, the 'run-as-written' DM audience can't use it. Similarly, if you over-design an encounter, a 'toolbox' DM might quickly lose interest in the unnecessary details. Make sure you understand the needs of the audience for your product, then satisfy those needs. It will save time on your end, and frustration on theirs.

Tomb of Annihilation Companion
Another prolific DMs Guild creator is Sean McGovern, who publishes, blogs, and streams under the name Power Score RPG. Sean's output is amazing, both in terms of the amount and the quality. He is involved in every facet of the game, from creating his own content on the Guild to overseeing the [Official Dice, Camera, Action! wiki](#).



Sean has been at the forefront of publishing content to support each season's official storyline, in the form of "companions" to the product. His latest is the *Tomb of Annihilation Companion*.

This product does what a lot of DMs do—and other DMs wish they had time to do—when they prepare and run a campaign: develop unique player content, as well as take the adventure in different directions.

Tomb of Annihilation Companion provides 50 pages full of unique offerings: additional dinosaur racing rules; new monsters like the giant hive wasp; four new treasures; expanded Omu locations; rules for creating albino dwarf characters; and much more. One of our favorite additions is a day-by-day guide to a 30-day trip through the lost jungles of Chult. This not only gives DMs a way to run an interesting travel-based game, but it also provides a solid framework on which DMs can build their own.

[LEARN MORE](#)

Design Thought: Creating New Subraces



Tomb of Annihilation Companion provides a new subrace: albino dwarves. This Chultan variant of the dwarf is a perfect place to highlight our three elements for creating good rules: they should be flavorful, they should be fun, and they should be balanced.

The albino dwarves presented in the companion are definitely flavorful, as their contrasts with the mountain and hill dwarves are well defined and interesting. While the “fun” part of the equation is always open to interpretation and opinion, the albino dwarves seem to fit the bill—however, the *sunlight sensitivity* trait is always one that is hard to deal with in actual play. Although I often see this simply ignored by DMs and players, if you’re comfortable playing a race with a distinct vulnerability, then this could provide that challenge.

The balance element is generally the most difficult to manage.

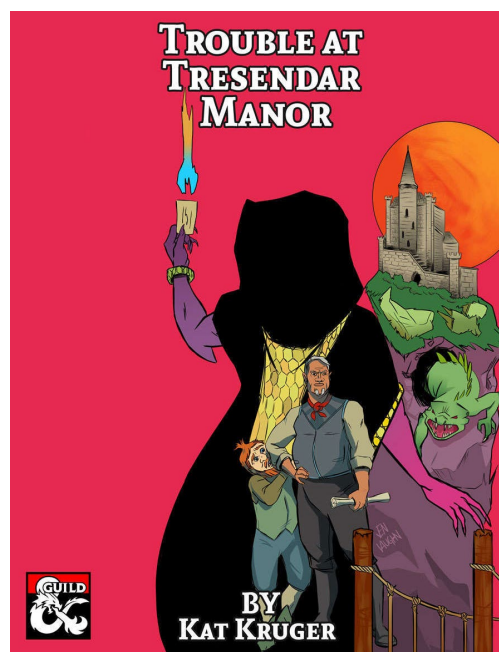
Perfect balance can seem impossible, but as you create your own races, subraces, and other rules elements, it should be an important step in your design process. In this case, you can hold the albino dwarf up to the other dwarf subclasses and see how it fits, which you should also do with any subrace you create.

Other Products

Trouble at Tresendar Manor by Kat Kruger

Price: \$2.95

Continuing on the theme of supplements to official D&D products, this short adventure for first-level characters is set in the town of Phandalin (the location for the fifth edition adventure *Lost Mine of Phandelver*, which came as part of the boxed *D&D Starter Set*). Creator Kat Kruger is the DM for the popular D&D streaming show called *d20 Dames*, and runs her campaign using that famous location as a base. The plot of this adventure is uncomplicated, which is great for shorter adventures for low-level characters and new players. It takes a well-designed trek through potentially familiar territory, since the place featured prominently as a bandit hideout in *Lost Mine of Phandelver*.



[LEARN MORE](#)

50 Notice Board Quests by DropTheDie and Jennifer Roy

Price: \$3.00

There are four key tenets to this collection of quests for D&D players: “Give ‘Em Something To

Do”; “Thoughtful Layout”; “Improve your Improvisational Chops”; and “NPCs are Present and Accounted For”. It suggests that while it’s rewarding building an entire world for your players to explore, sometimes you just want to let them decide what they want to get involved in. In which case, this collection is for you.

LEARN MORE



Design Thought: Creating Adventures

Using previous published (and well-loved) adventures as springboards for your own adventures is a great way to get acclimated to the process of adventure design. Much of the difficult work associated with adventure design is already done for you: you can reuse professionally designed maps (as *Trouble of Tresendar Manor* does); take advantage of already familiar NPCs; pick up on plot threads established but not fully developed; and more.

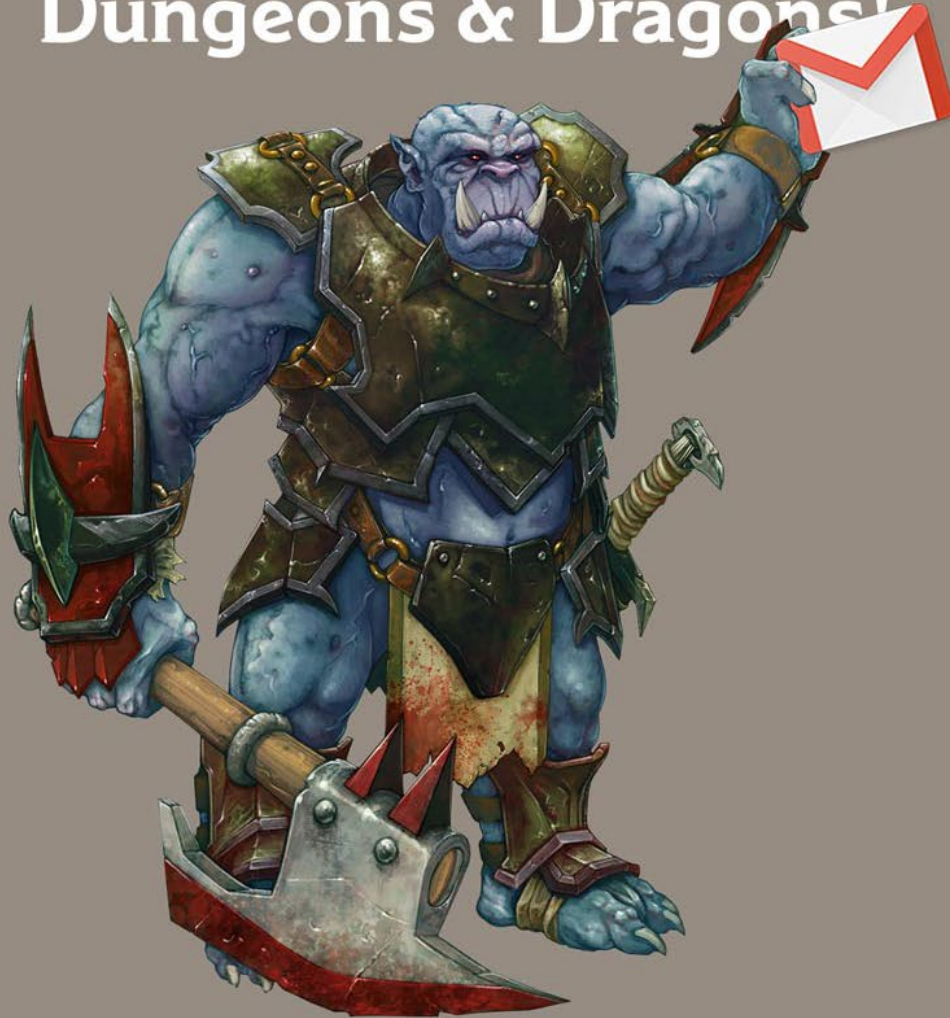
It is also a great way to learn the ins and outs of formatting a product. An adventure is a technical document as much as a story, and presentation of information can matter as much as the information itself. Practicing with the style and format of the officially released content provides a richer understanding of the craft.

Game designer and editor Shawn Merwin’s professional work on Dungeons & Dragons has ranged from third to fifth edition, showing up in sourcebooks, adventures, articles, and Organized Play administration. He wrote the Acquisitions Incorporated adventure *Quest for the Bronzebottom Bock* has written adventures for the D&D Adventurers League, and manages convention-created content for Baldman Games.

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Unearthed Arcana: Centaur and Minotaurs

This document presents the centaur, a new playtest option for when you choose your character's race. We've also included a revised version of the minotaur's traits, which appeared in a previous installment of Unearthed Arcana.

This Is Playtest Content

The material here is presented for playtesting and to spark your imagination. These game mechanics are in draft form, usable in your campaign but not refined by final game design and editing. They aren't officially part of the game and aren't permitted in D&D Adventurers League events.

If we decide to make this material official, it will be refined based on your feedback, and then it will appear in a D&D book.

Centaur

Roamers at heart, centaurs love open spaces and the freedom to travel. As much as they can, centaurs run. They race the wind, hooves thundering and tails streaming behind them.

Nature's Cavalry

Centaur have humanoid upper bodies, displaying all the human variety of skin tones and features. In size, they are comparable to a human rider mounted on a horse, and they fill similar roles—as cavalry, messengers, outriders, and scouts.

Centaur's ears are slightly pointed, but their faces are more wide and square than those of elves. Below the waist, they have the bodies of horses, with coats tending toward brown shades (chestnut or bay) and darker tails.

Nature and Community

Centaur have a strong sense of the interconnectedness of the natural world, and they celebrate family and community as microcosms of that greater connection.

The birth of a foal is always cause for festivities. At the same time, centaurs revere the traditions of the past, preserving old ways and keeping alive the legends of ancestral heroes. They feel a close kinship with wild animals, perhaps because of their own hybrid nature, and delight in the feeling of running alongside herds and packs of beasts.

Centaur Names

Centaur's given names are passed down through family lines. The name given to a new foal is typically the name of the most recently deceased family member of the same gender, keeping alive the memory—and, the centaurs believe, some shard of the spirit—of the departed.

Centaur rarely use family names, but wear symbols that represent their family membership. These symbols might include graphical representations of plants or animals, printed mottos, braids and beads worn in the hair and tail, or even specific patterns of woven fabric.

Centaur Traits

The following traits are shared by player characters who are centaurs.

Ability Score Increase. Your Strength score increases by 2, and your Wisdom score increases by 1.

Age. Centaur mature and age at about the same rate as humans.

Alignment. Centaur are inclined toward neutrality.

Size. Your size is Medium, yet you tower over most other humanoids.

Speed. Your base walking speed is 40 feet.

Charge. If you move at least 20 feet straight toward a target and then hit it with a melee weapon attack on the same turn, roll the weapon's damage dice twice and add them together. Once you use this ability, you can't use it again until you finish a short or long rest.

Hooves. Your hooves are natural melee weapons, with which you're proficient. If you hit with a hoof, the target takes bludgeoning damage equal to 1d6 + your Strength modifier.

Equine Build. You count as one size larger when determining your carrying capacity and the weight you can push or drag.

In addition, any climb that requires hands and feet is especially difficult for you because of your hooves. When you make such a climb, each foot of movement costs you 4 extra feet, instead of the normal 1 extra foot.

Finally, a Medium or smaller creature can ride on your equine back if you allow it. In such a situation, you continue to act independently, not as a controlled mount.

Survivor. You have proficiency in the Survival skill.

Hybrid Nature. You have two creature types: humanoid and monstrosity. You can be affected by a game effect if it works on either of your creature types.

Languages. You can speak, read, and write Common and Sylvan.

Minotaur

In 2015, minotaurs appeared as a playtest option in *Unearthed Arcana*. Here is a revised set of traits for minotaur player characters. These traits are suitable for minotaurs on Krynn and in other D&D worlds where these people have avoided the demonic influence of Baphomet.

Minotaur Traits

The following traits are shared by player characters who are minotaurs.

Ability Score Increase. Your Strength score increases by 2, and your Constitution score increases by 1.

Alignment. Most minotaurs lean toward lawful alignments.

Size. Minotaurs average over 6 feet in height, and they have strong, stocky builds. Your size is Medium.

Speed. Your base walking speed is 30 feet.

Horns. Your horns are natural melee weapons, with which you're proficient. When you hit with

them, the target takes piercing damage equal to 1d6 + your Strength modifier.

Goring Rush. Immediately after you use the Dash action on your turn and move at least as far as your speed, you can make one melee attack with your horns as a bonus action.

Hammering Horns. Immediately after you hit a creature with a melee attack as part of the Attack action on your turn, you can attempt to shove that creature with your horns using your reaction. The creature must be no more than one size larger than you and within 5 feet of you. It must make a Strength saving throw against a DC equal to 8 + your proficiency bonus + your Strength modifier. If it fails, you push it up to 5 feet away from you.

Menacing. You have proficiency in the Intimidation skill.

Hybrid Nature. You have two creature types: humanoid and monstrosity. You can be affected by a game effect if it works on either of your creature types.

Languages. You can speak, read, and write Common and Minotaur.



Comic Explosion: The Adventure Zone Comes to Life

Podcaster Griffin McElroy and artist Carey Pietsch explain how laziness saved you all from fighting even more robots as they present The Adventure Zone comic and first playable scenario!

PLEASE NOTE, THAT THE ADVENTURE ZONE COMIC CONTAINS VERY ADULT LANGUAGE. READER DISCRETION IS ADVISED.

Biweekly podcast The Adventure Zone pushes the Dungeons & Dragons roleplaying game to the max with its mix of fighting, puzzles, comedy and... robots? “The feel of our show is ‘fantasy *adjacent*.’ There are robots. So many robots,” says Griffin McElroy,

who is one of four McElroy family members who help make up the game (brothers Justin and Travis and father Clint being the others).



(Select to view)

As well as producing a comic-book based on the characters from the podcast (titled *Here There Be Gerblins*), they have also created the first ever official playable TAZ adventure: *The Return to the Test of Initiation!* So how did they go about maintaining their comedic tone when shifting to other formats?

“Honestly, adapting a podcast to *any* other medium is pretty tricky, given the fairly laid-back nature of the medium. That’s a tone which

doesn't exactly translate well anywhere else," Griffin admits.

"For the graphic novel, we were able to get all the important story beats, recurring gags and character development from the first arc pretty well represented. There were a few bits of out-of-character stuff that didn't really fit, but I think we were able to find a really nice balance. For the one-shot adventure, I tried to design it as I would an episode of the podcast or a live show: it's a few over-the-top set-pieces and battles that I think fit into the feel of our show."



(Select to view)

"A huge part of what I love about The Adventure Zone podcast is

how you can clearly hear joy in the McElroys' collaborative storytelling. Obviously, a comic-book can't manage that in the same way," agrees artist Carey Pietsch.

"But the visual element allowed the team to explore new avenues to bring the fun of the show to the page. One of the big things I loved doing was translating some of the voice acting into physical acting, which can go a long way towards fleshing out a character's personality in a comic. I tried to bring a little bit of that personality into the character portraits in the adventure, too."

Playable scenario *The Return to the Test of Initiation!* features the arena from **episode eight** of The Adventure Zone podcast. Griffin chose that as the basis for the adventure because it was something regular listeners would remember, but also didn't feature so late in the campaign that it would spoil things for total newcomers.

"Looking at our early episodes, it felt like the Test of Initiation was a perfect fit for our purposes. It was the first tricky, dangerous fight the heroes had to face in the show, and having players take their own turn running it—albeit with a twist—felt really natural."



(Select to view)

Players running this scenario should also thank Griffin for his laziness. Initially, the idea was to create a number of other automatons for this challenge, before his apathy kicked in.

“I had originally thought about designing robotic counterparts to all the available player characters that the DM could throw at the party during the first fight—a Robot Magnus, a Robot Carey, and so on. I went in a different direction, partially because that made *no sense whatsoever*, and also, it would have been a *lot* of work, and I am very lazy,” he jokes.



(Select to view)

Another element that was tricky to translate into a visual medium was the voidfish from the Bureau of Balance’s moon base. “The voidfish was a plot device that became so, so much more than that as we continued through the campaign. I hesitate to spoil anything for newcomers, but... it’s magical and mysterious as *heck*,” he says.

“When we were first figuring out how to handle the voidfish on the page, I think I spent equal time looking up weird degraded VHS glitches and artifact-heavy Gameboy camera pics as I did researching massive, spooky, deep-sea creatures. So it’s maybe somewhere right

in the middle of that very strange—and very cool!—Venn diagram,” adds Pietsch.

Visit theadventurezonecomic.com to order *The Adventure Zone: Here There Be Gerblins*.

You can access a taster for the comic, the one-shot adventure and character sheets for three fan-favorite Adventure Zone characters using the link below.*

[DOWNLOAD PDF](#)



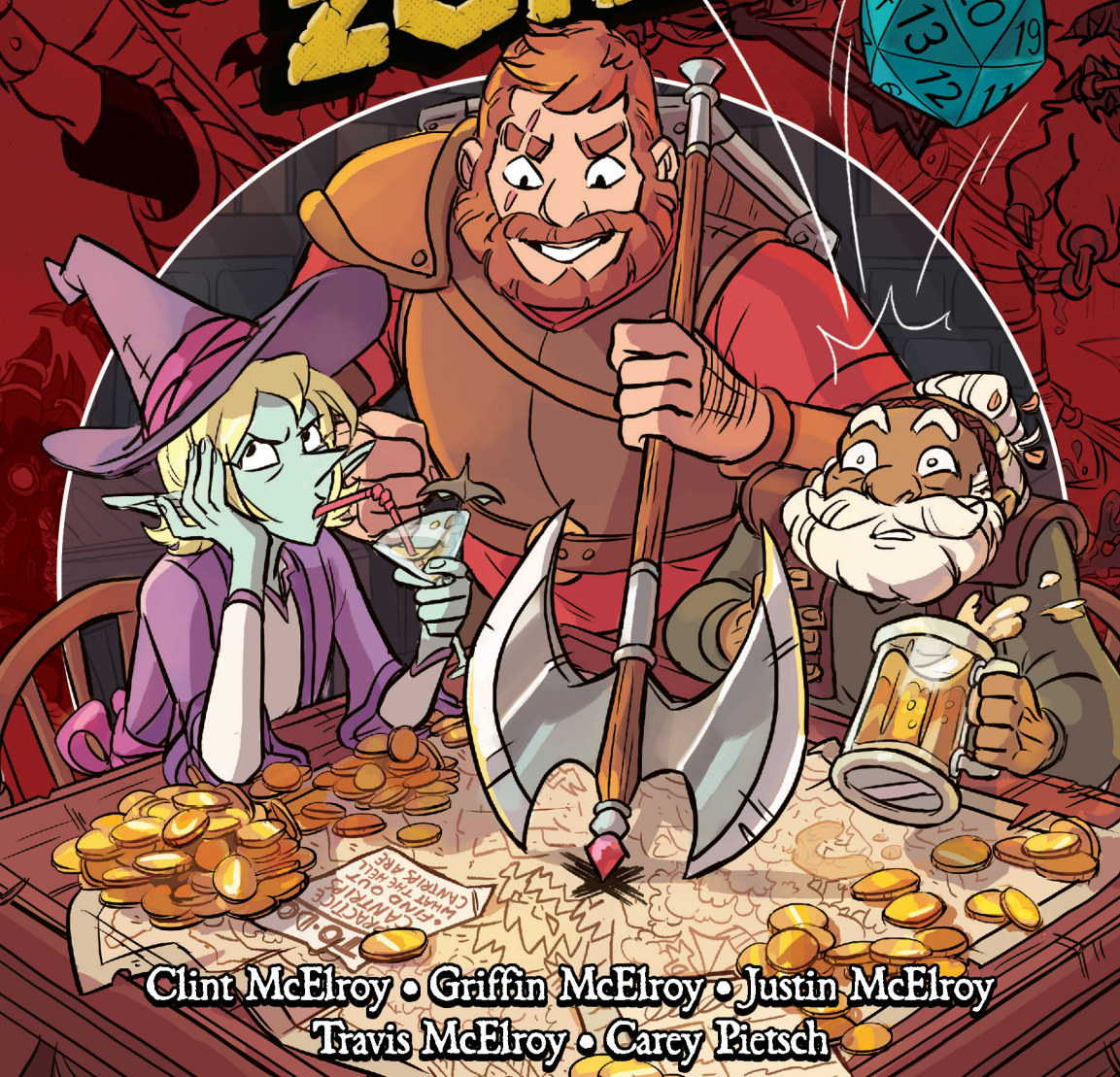
[BACK TO TOP](#)



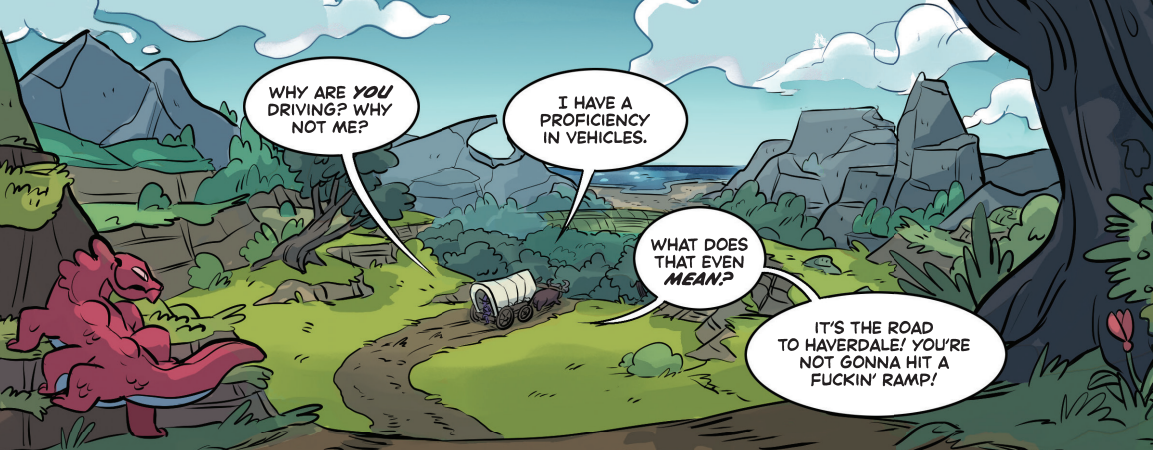
Featuring the first ever official playable TAZ adventure:
The Return to The Test of Initiation!

THE ADVENTURE ZONE

Here There
Be Gerblins



Clint McElroy • Griffin McElroy • Justin McElroy
Travis McElroy • Carey Pietsch



WHY ARE YOU DRIVING? WHY NOT ME?

I HAVE A PROFICIENCY IN VEHICLES.

WHAT DOES THAT EVEN MEAN?

IT'S THE ROAD TO HAVERDALE! YOU'RE NOT GONNA HIT A FUCKIN' RAMP!

MAGNUS BURNSIDES
 Race HUMAN
 Class FIGHTER
 + PROFICIENCIES +
 → Battle
 → Carpentry
 → Everything else... apparently

TRUST ME, IF THE LAW HASSLES US, I'M THE GUY YOU WANT AT THE FRONT OF THE WAGON.

BUT LOOK, IF YOU WANT TO DRIVE SO BAD, I MIGHT LET YOU SPELL ME THE NEXT TIME THE DWARF HAS TO STOP FOR A "PEE BREAK."

HELL, NO! I'VE GOT STUFF TO DO.

I'VE READ THE BOOKS. ADVENTURERS ARE SUPPOSE TO, LIKE, FORAGE FOR FOOD AND SHIT.

BOR-R-R-RING! NO, THANK YOU. NOT FOR TAAKO.

I AGREE. F THAT S!

TAAKO
 Race ELF
 Class WIZARD
 + PROFICIENCIES +
 → Spell-casting
 → Transmutation
 → Gastronomy

WHAT ARE YOU DOING, MERLE?

I'M STUDYING MY CANTRIPS!

JUST SAY "MASTURBATING." WE GET IT.

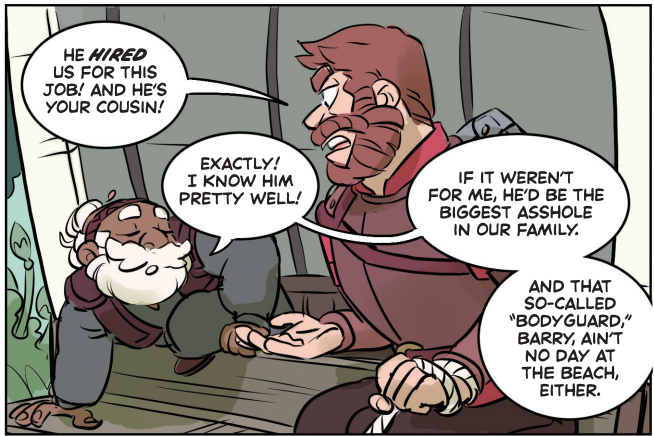
"DON'T COME IN, MOM! I'M STUDYING MY CANTRIPS!!"

I HAPPEN TO BE DEEP IN THOUGHT!!

MERLE HIGHCHURCH
 Race DWARF
 Class CLERIC
 + PROFICIENCIES +
 → Healing... supposedly
 → Religion stuff
 → Bleeding



I'M VERY CONFLICTED! I DON'T TRUST THIS BOGARD GUY!



HE HIRED US FOR THIS JOB! AND HE'S YOUR COUSIN!

EXACTLY! I KNOW HIM PRETTY WELL!

IF IT WEREN'T FOR ME, HE'D BE THE BIGGEST ASSHOLE IN OUR FAMILY.

AND THAT SO-CALLED "BODY GUARD," BARRY, AIN'T NO DAY AT THE BEACH, EITHER.



WHY DIDN'T THEY JUST TAKE ALL THIS WITH THEM INSTEAD OF HAVING US HAUL IT?

I CAN'T FIND ANYTHING EDIBLE, THAT'S FOR SURE.



A BUNCH OF MINING STUFF, SHIT TO BLOW UP OTHER SHIT.

THE ONLY MINE IN THESE PARTS WAS LOST A DECADE AGO.



AND THE WAY YOUR COUSIN KEPT SAYING "THIS IS THE LAST JOB YOU'LL EVER NEED! THE LAST JOB YOU'LL EVER NEED!"

I GET THE WHOLE "WINK-WINK YOU'RE GONNA BE RICH" VIBE, BUT IT CAME ACROSS AS KIND OF MURDER-Y.



I AM... UNEASY.

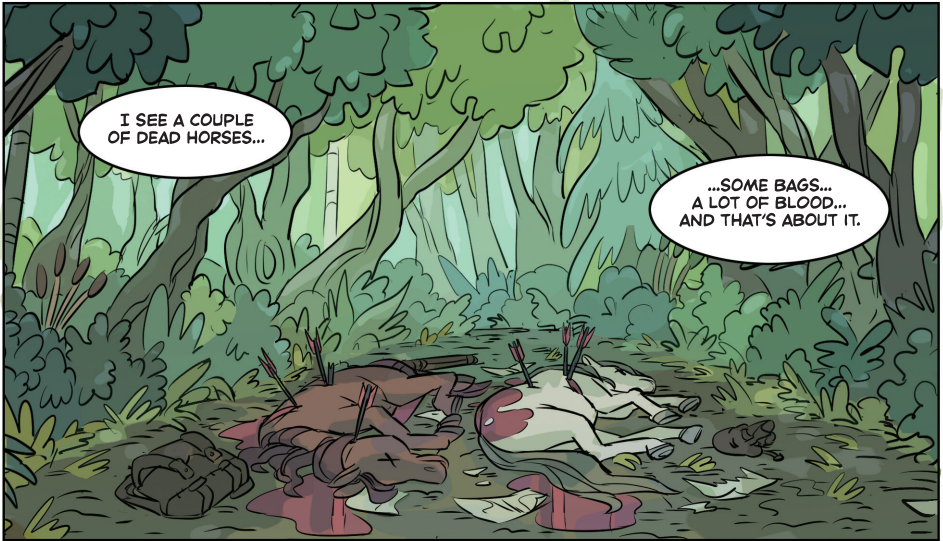
THEN YOU ARE JUST GONNA LOVE THIS.

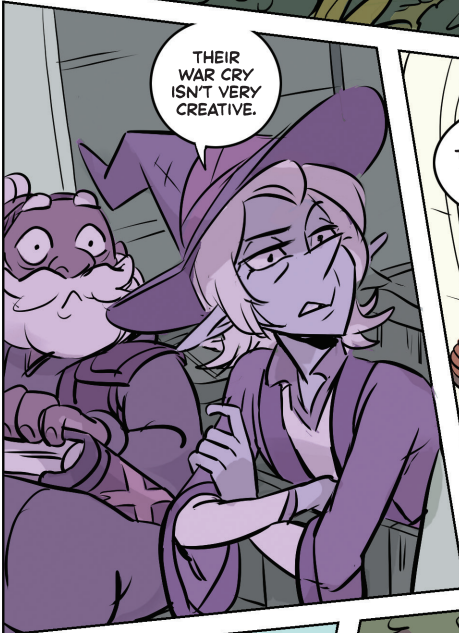


IT'S KIND OF TOUGH TO SEE...

...BUT I THINK THE SHIT HAS GONE SOUTH.







Fwoosh!!

AAAAGH!!

SPLHZZZ!!

WHAZZZ
KERASH!!

FUCK!

IT'S OUR
FIRST KILL!!

AND TAAKO'S
THE ONE WHO PUT US
ON THE BOARD!

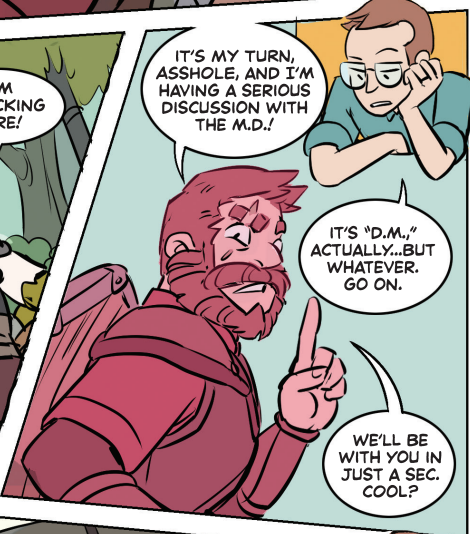
THE...
YOU KNOW,
KILLING
BOARD.

AT LEAST
HE'S NOT ON FIRE
ANYMORE! THAT
WAS THOUGHTFUL
OF YOU!

YOU KNOW, IF
YOU HAD BOTHERED TO
TALK TO THEM YOU
WOULD HAVE REALIZED
THAT THEY WERE THE
WELCOME COMMITTEE.
THEY JUST WANTED
HUGS.

KIDDING.
THEY
DEFINITELY
WANTED TO
KILL YOU.

...AND ONE
STILL DOES!





LET'S SEE HOW THIS WORKS.



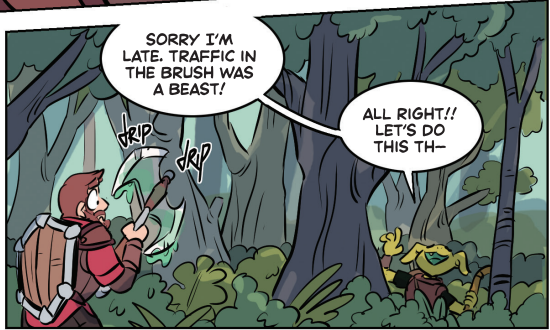
FOLLOW-THROUGH WAS A LITTLE OFF. MAYBE I NEED TO ADJUST MY GRIP.

I DON'T KNOW,

I DON'T THINK YOU COULD HAVE CUT HIM IN HALF ANY HARDER THAN THAT.



HEY, GUYS!



SORRY I'M LATE. TRAFFIC IN THE BRUSH WAS A BEAST!

ALL RIGHT!! LET'S DO THIS TH-

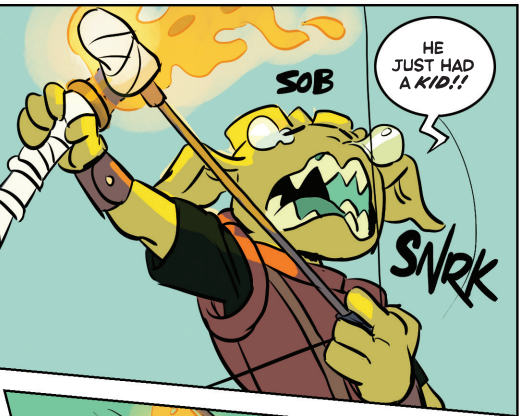




OH, GOD, NO!

MY FRIENDS!

SWEET FANTASY JESUS! NOT KEVIN!



SOB

HE JUST HAD A KID!!

SNRK



TWAANG!



THUNK!

....YIKES.



HEY! DID YOU KNOW OUR CANYON IS ON FIRE?!

DON'T LET MY STUFF BURN!!

WHAT ABOUT-

FUCK BOGARD'S SHIT!



LIKE THE EXPLOSIVES AND BLASTING CAPS?

FINE! SAVE THAT! BUT THEN MY STUFF!



AND WHO'S GONNA GET THAT GUY?



BELIEVE IT OR NOT, I CAN INSTANTLY SNUFF OUT A CANDLE, TORCH, OR SMALL CAMPFIRE. I THINK I CAN HANDLE THE CARAVAN.

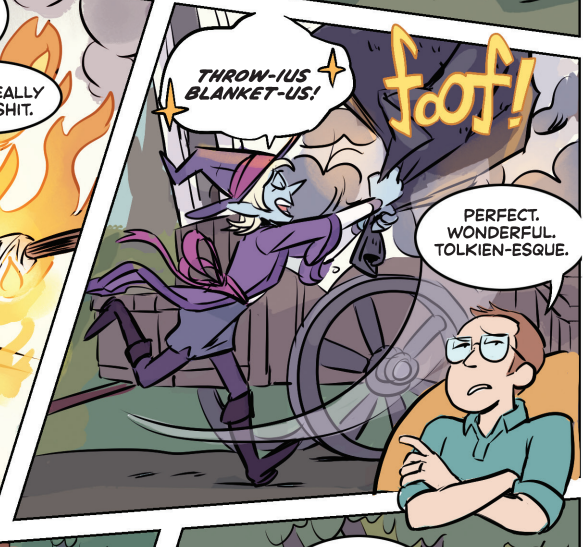
GO ON. KILL THAT GUY. HAVE YOUR FUN.



NOW, YOU NEED TO DO SOME KIND OF INCANTATION, I GUESS.

SOME REALLY TIGHT SHIT.

MM-HM.



THROW-IT! BLANKET-US!

foof!

PERFECT. WONDERFUL. TOLKIEN-ESQUE.



HUP!

GEH!



WHUNK!!

OOH, SOUNDS LIKE YOU GOT SOME MEAT THERE!





STILL WARM.
THIS DIDN'T
HAPPEN VERY
LONG AGO.

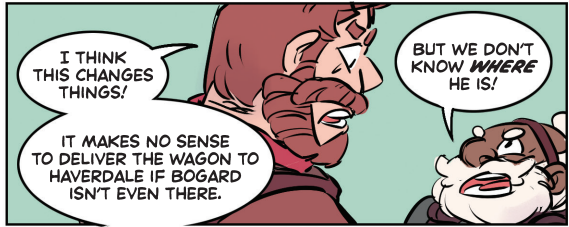
NO BOGARD,
NO BARRY, AND
NO MAP.

AND WHAT
THE HELL DID HE
NEED A MAP FOR? HE
KNOWS THE WAY TO
HAVERDALE!



SO WHAT DO
WE DO NOW?

"AND THAT
WAS THE SAD,
BORING END OF
THEIR FIRST
MISSION!"



I THINK
THIS CHANGES
THINGS!

IT MAKES NO SENSE
TO DELIVER THE WAGON TO
HAVERDALE IF BOGARD
ISN'T EVEN THERE.

BUT WE DON'T
KNOW *WHERE*
HE IS!



IF YOU
GUYS ARE
DONE...

...WE COULD
JUST FOLLOW
THOSE DRAG
MARKS INTO
THE BRUSH?



MAGNUS
RUSHES
HEADLONG
INTO THE BRUSH!

WAIT!
WHAT ABOUT
OUR STUFF?!



OH, DON'T
WORRY, MAGNUS!
WE'LL TAKE CARE OF
EVERYTHING!!

YOU JUST RUN
OFF AND LEAVE US
TO TAKE CARE OF THE
WAGON! TOTALLY COOL!
SUPER COOL.

COOL,
THANKS,
BYE!

THE RETURN TO THE TEST OF INITIATION

Written by Griffin McElroy Illustrations and character designs by Carey Pietsch

Welcome to the first ever official playable *TAZ* adventure: *The Return to the Test of Initiation!* In this adventure you'll get to play as some of your favorite characters from the Bureau of Balance and explore the moon base. Everything you need to play this adventure is included except dice, but if a question comes up that you can't find the answer to—like 'Exactly how many robot arms can Magnus carry at once?'—we recommend checking the official Fifth Edition *Dungeon Master's Guide* or *Player's Handbook* from Wizards of the Coast, or any of many other great resources on the internet.

INTRODUCTION

"There are no legends about the Bureau of Balance. There are no tales of heroism shared from traveler to traveler across Faerun's roads. No poems recited around the tavern's hearth. The people of this world do not show the Bureau gratitude for the salvation they've been provided. And the reason for this is quite simple: They do not know that they have been saved.

"Such absence of information is the Bureau's stock-in-trade. For years, this world warred itself into oblivion, seeking artifacts known as the Grand Relics. Countless armies were assembled and lost in the pursuit of these immensely powerful objects—objects that seemed to cast an undeniable thrall over every living being that found themselves unlucky enough to encounter them. They promised a power that could change the world, and in this one regard, the Relics were truthful: Because of the unchecked fervor of those hunting for them, the world itself was rotting away.

"And then, in the blink of an eye, the world forgot the Grand Relics had ever existed.

"That piece of knowledge, among so many others, has been suppressed by the Bureau of Balance. Under the guidance of their Director, the Bureau now hunts the Relics themselves in secrecy. But, unlike those who sought the Relics in the past, they do not seek their power—they seek their annihilation.

"They watch the world for signs of the Relics from their headquarters in the sky: a false moon, which those living below have been lulled into believing has always been there. The Bureau's

members scour the land, chasing leads of the Relics' resting places. Their members are some of the world's most capable adventurers, equipped with technological marvels and magic-imbued equipment that would make them the envy of your average career treasure seeker.

"Theirs is an enormous responsibility. And to prove they are capable of handling it, each member of the Bureau of Balance must first pass a trial before joining the organization: The aptly named Test of Initiation.

"The members of your party have already passed this test. You survived an arena designed to challenge your ability to work as a team, not just to overpower the animatronic foes waiting within, but to outwit them as well. Every Bureau member can recall their rites of passage, and recite in great detail the feats of skill that led their party to victory.

"You each have your own tales of the tribulations you faced in the Test of Initiation.

"After tonight, you will have another."

OVERVIEW

This adventure takes place aboard the Bureau of Balance headquarters, a wondrous, circular facility that floats in the night sky over Faerun. On the surface of the headquarters, a campus of lush, well-maintained grass is dotted with several dome-shaped buildings connected by paved roads. Each dome serves a particular need for the Bureau—there are several dormitories; training grounds; a strange shop known as the "Fantasy Costco" and the main gathering hall, which also hosts the Director's office and the Relic Dispos-

al Chamber. Elevators within each dome take passengers to other chambers serving different functions below, within the bowels of the facility.

Your players will be embodying characters from *The Adventure Zone*, all of whom serve different roles within the Bureau's various teams. Taako, Merle, and Magnus are Reclaimers, a group assigned to act on intel to retrieve the Grand Relics from the world below and bring them back to the Bureau to be destroyed. Killian and Carey are Regulators, a group which polices the exploits of the Reclaimers and neutralizes those who would fall prey to the Relics' thrall. Johann works aboard the facility itself as a sort of groundskeeper—his main role is to see to the well-being of the Voidfish, a mysterious entity that dwells within the heart of the Bureau's campus.

You will find character sheets for all six of these heroes in the back of this booklet. If your players are brand-new to Dungeons and Dragons Fifth Edition, you can find basic rules on the official D&D website at dnd.wizards.com. (You can also use a basic Dungeon Master's guide there as well, if you're new to this, too. Also, if that's the case: Welcome to the jungle. I apologize in advance for all the shenanigans your soon-to-be former friends are about to try and pull.)

In the fiction of *The Adventure Zone*, it would be rare for particular combinations of these six heroes to work together as a unit. As the DM, it is up to you to figure out why your player characters are the ones who answered the call to action this evening. Maybe they're the only ones who answered their alarms in the middle of the night. Maybe Merle was "studying his cantrips." Maybe Taako just wasn't feeling it.

There's a certain amount of narrative dissonance that will be inherent in this adventure. I fully encourage you to just barrel on through it. Inform your players that this is a non-canonical companion piece to the story of the podcast and book — and, as such, their characters and the Bureau itself will face mortal peril, depending on the events that transpire.

In short: Tell your players, "I don't care if Magnus is alive later on in the adventure. If he gets

stabbed too many times tonight, Magnus is going to die." This is a very good and scary thing to tell your players, and, to be frank, is an energy I wish I'd brought to the table more often while we were recording the podcast.

-Griffin McElroy

A RUDE AWAKENING

"You, and your companions, have been roused from your slumber in the middle of the night, and called before the Director in the gathering hall at the far edge of the Bureau of Balance moon base. Your walk across the campus from the dormitories to the hall was deathly quiet; the usual evening security detail that patrols these grounds is absent tonight. It is just you, strolling in silence, a sea of stars above, the unaware world below.

"The scene inside the gathering hall is similarly still. The guards who usually stand vigil during your meetings with the Director are nowhere to be seen. As you enter one by one, the Director calls you forward to the great dais at the back of the room, a grim look on her weary face. Only once you have all assembled does she reveal the reason for disrupting your rest."

The Director is a somewhat serious figure in the story of *The Adventure Zone*, and the meetings your players have had with her have all carried tremendous importance. This meeting is no different. She addresses the members of the Bureau with the utmost formality, as she holds the missions they conduct as her highest, most sacred duty.

Greet the heroes apologetically at first—both for waking them, and for assigning them a dangerous task which wouldn't normally fall directly under their job description. After a few moments of introduction—during which you should find an explanation for the absent playable characters listed in this booklet, if the situation requires it—it's time to outline the adventure your players will be running through.

"Several hours ago, we received reports from our Director of Security, Captain Lyssa, that the automatons we've developed for use in the Test

of Initiation had gone rogue. They breached their confinement in the workshop below the arena where the Test is conducted, and, if not for the quick thinking of Captain Lyssa and her team, would have continued their assault into the rest of the base. These machines are designed to test the combat capabilities of our recruits without remorse. I shudder to think of the casualties we would have suffered if their attack had gone unnoticed.

“However, Lyssa and her team were unsuccessful in neutralizing the threat altogether. They have contained the automatons inside the arena where the test is administered, but lack the personnel to properly handle the situation. As luck would have it, the majority of our internal security forces are on leave this weekend on an overnight team-building retreat.

“The automatons are maintained by a dwarven engineer named Carlyle, who has been missing since the automatons began their assault. If he’s still in the workshop under the arena, he’s almost surely been killed. For now, the door into the arena has been secured by Captain Lyssa, but we do not know how long it will hold out. I am asking you to enter the Test of Initiation once again, put an end to this robot rebellion, and—assuming he hasn’t already been lost to his own creations—rescue Carlyle.”

Understanding that this task is asking a lot of the heroes, the Director has planned compensation for their involvement: One token each for the Fantasy Gachapon, a device that bestows an assortment of magical items to those who perform exemplary works in the name of the Bureau. Also, upon completing their mission, each hero will also receive bonus compensation in the amount of 250 gold pieces each.

Due to her managerial role, the Director doesn’t know much in the way of specifics for how the automatons function, but can provide the following if pressed for more information:

- The automatons should not be able to act of their own volition. The fact that they’re seemingly doing just that is concerning, to say the least.
- A Test of Initiation was administered earlier that afternoon, and the arena had not been reset

since its completion. It is likely to be in a state of disrepair this evening.

- The standard Test of Initiation was designed for three participants: One who would engage three mechanical ogres on the arena floor; one who would support that participant with a cannon that fires three types of projectiles (one capable of healing combatants below, one capable of “marking” combatants to draw the attention of the automatons, and one capable of doubling the potency of a combatant’s next attack); and one, positioned on a catwalk above, would be tasked with defending a button (which delivers a paralyzing electric shock to the participant controlling the cannon) from waves of humanoid automatons. Only by working in tandem could the participants defeat all three ogres and pass the trial.

- The automatons were not designed with any natural weakness the heroes could exploit.

Upon finishing the briefing, the Director releases the heroes to seek out Leon the Artificer who facilitates the use of the Fantasy Gachapon, to equip themselves for the battle ahead. Following that, they are to report to Captain Lyssa by the entrance to the arena, accessible by an elevator that leads underneath the Training Dome.

A VISIT TO THE FANTASY GACHAPON

“Having received a briefing from the Director, your party hastens to the chambers of Leon the Artificer, just within the Armory Dome located near the center of the campus. Leon, a bearded, bespectacled gnome, greets you groggily as you enter. He is standing behind a desk littered with tomes containing information on the magical items the Bureau can distribute to its members; he is dressed in a nightgown, having been awakened at the Director’s behest mere moments ago.

“Immediately behind Leon is the Fantasy Gachapon — a mysterious device comprised of a mechanism where Bureau members deposit the

tokens they've been allotted to activate a crank built into the machine's heavy iron base, and an enormous, bulbous glass tank containing several dozen objects of various shapes and sizes, all housed within discrete plastic capsules."

If you're new to the show, yes, this is essentially one of those toy-capsule vending machines you might find in our world. In *The Adventure Zone*, the Fantasy Gachapon is a method of distributing random magical items of varying levels of usefulness to players. We have fun, here.

After welcoming the group to his chambers, Leon the Artificer instructs each hero to approach the machine, insert their token, and turn the crank to receive a magical prize from within. If pressed for the reasoning about this circuitous method of equipping Bureau members, explain that the organization's main purpose is to disarm the world below of powerful magic items—by distributing random, less potent magical items in this manner, the Bureau avoids completely betraying its mission statement.

As your players drop their tokens into the machine and turn the crank, have them roll a D20. In the rear of this booklet, you will find a list of magical items numbered 1 to 20, which will dictate what they receive as a result. If another player rolls the same number as a player who previously used the machine, have them roll again until they land on a number that has not yet been claimed.

The list of these magical items also contains descriptions of their function. Explain each item's capabilities in character as Leon, consulting the large tomes on his desk that serve as encyclopedias for every item contained within the Fantasy Gachapon.

If you find your players needlessly antagonizing Leon — for instance, pretending they do not understand the very basic instructions on how to operate the Fantasy Gachapon — congratulations! You're playing with a listener of our podcast. Tormenting Leon is a time-honored tradition on *The Adventure Zone*, and we thoroughly encourage you to carry on that grand tradition in your game.

If you're feeling generous, or, for whatever reason, want to distribute additional items from the

Gachapon to your players, go for it. Maybe two capsules fall out of the machine instead of one. Maybe your players tie a string to their token to retrieve it from the bowels of the Gachapon. However, breaking the glass to retrieve all the items within is strictly prohibited. The glass is magically reinforced, and is virtually indestructible. (I literally just made that up because my players never attempted such heresy, but, screw it, I thought up the Fantasy Gachapon, and I can tailor the rules as I see fit.)

Not all items contained within the Fantasy Gachapon possess equal amounts of awe-inspiring practicality. If one of your players is unsatisfied with the item they receive, understand that this is the best imaginable scenario for you, the DM. If you can work in some moment where this apparent dud can serve as a lifesaving instrument of destiny, I guarantee the player who groused about their misfortune will be eternally impressed by your storytelling expertise. That's the secret sauce, folks.

After everyone has received their magical items from the Fantasy Gachapon, Leon instructs them to report to Captain Lyssa at the entrance to the arena. He then retires to his bedroom, through a small door located just next to the machine. Encourage your players to let the poor guy get some rest, and carry on with the adventure.

INTO THE BREACH

"The elevator doors slide open with a pleasant chime as you reach your destination below the Training Dome, revealing a hallway that ends at a barricaded doorway into the arena beyond. Three Bureau security personnel are located in this hallway, all wearing the blue-and-white uniforms donned by the facility's internal employees.

"One guard is lying with his back against the wall of this hallway, barely clinging to consciousness as another guard sees to his superficial wounds. You presume the third guard in this chamber is Captain Lyssa—a human with tufts of short brown hair poking out of a bandage covering signs of the recent battle on her forehead. She

stops stacking chairs in front of the door into the arena as you emerge from the elevator, and turns to face you, clearly exasperated.

“Took you long enough,” she says with a sigh.”

Captain Lyssa and her two companions were the first and only responders to the automaton attack this evening. She is exhausted, but resilient, and immensely resentful of her absent colleagues, who are at this very moment likely engaging in low-ropes courses and trust falls during their retreat.

Upon greeting the heroes, Lyssa explains the situation:

- Her team was able to destroy a handful of automatons before being routed into the hallway. The tide of the battle was turned when a larger automaton, one shaped like a spider, dropped into the arena and engaged the trio.

- By her count, only four automatons remain functional within: the aforementioned spider and three humanoid automatons, all of which come equipped with long arm-mounted blades.

- She saw no sign of Carlyle in the arena. He’s likely in the workshop, which is only accessible through an archway protected by a large wrought-iron gate on the far wall of the arena.

- Her team didn’t uncover any reason for the rebellion, but Lyssa assumes that whatever made the automatons go haywire will be found in the workshop behind the aforementioned gate.

- The arena has not been reset since the Test of Initiation conducted earlier in the day, and as a result, the three mechanical ogres used in that test are still lying vanquished on the arena floor. The cannon used in the test appeared operational, but she was unable to determine how much ammunition remained in its chambers. Whoever ran the test last must have been a real overachiever, because the catwalk above, containing the electric shock-administering button, has been completely destroyed.

After briefing the heroes, Lyssa and her companions agree to remove their barricade from the entrance to the arena, warning them that the door will be sealed behind them, on the off chance their rescue mission goes sideways. After a few tense moments, the makeshift barricade is

disassembled, and the heroes rush into the arena, the door slamming immediately behind them, as promised.

THE TEST OF INITIATION, PART TWO

“Captain Lyssa slams the door behind you shut, with a boom that echoes throughout the arena — and in this moment, the scene is surprisingly still. The chamber is just as you remember it from your own trial; you’re standing near the edge of a circular pit 80 feet in diameter, the dusty floor strewn with debris from the Test of Initiation administered earlier that day.

“Shards of glass are scattered about the ground, fallen from the wrecked catwalk hanging above. The walls are splattered with the potions fired from the cannon used in the Test of Initiation, which is perched in the stands circling the pit, a ten-foot climb up the arena’s rusted metal enclosure. The only feature of the room left unscathed by the previous participant’s battle is the wrought-iron gate on the opposite wall from the door you just passed through, which covers a tunnel leading down into Carlyle’s workshop below.

“The three mechanical ogres that serve as antagonists in the trial are all lying defeated around the

SOLDIER AUTOMATON

Medium construct, unaligned

Armor Class 14 (natural armor)

Hit Points 12

Speed 30ft

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
15 (+2)	12(+1)	13(+1)	1(-5)	3(-4)	1(-5)

Damage Immunities poison

Condition Immunities charmed, deafened, frightened, poisoned

Senses blindsight 60 ft., passive Perception 6

Languages —

Challenge 1/4 (50 XP)

Automaton Phalanx: When a Soldier Automaton is within 5 feet of another Soldier Automaton, both enemies gain +1 to AC.

ACTIONS

Blade-Arm Swipe: *Melee Weapon Attack:* +4 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 5 (1d6 + 2) slashing damage.

SPIDER AUTOMATON

Medium construct, unaligned

Armor Class 15 (natural armor)

Hit Points 20

Speed 30ft

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
16 (+3)	12(+1)	14(+2)	1(-5)	3(-4)	1(-5)

Damage Immunities poison

Condition Immunities charmed, deafened, frightened, poisoned

Senses blindsight 60 ft., passive Perception 6

Languages —

Challenge 1/4 (50 XP)

Repair Drone: The Spider Automaton uses its eight tool-wielding appendages to quickly repair the Red Ogre Automaton. It first prioritizes fixing the Red Ogre Automaton downed in the middle of the room, then turns its attention to attacking the party.

ACTIONS

Red Ogre Repair: Heals Red Ogre Automaton for 3d8 Hit Points. Upon first use, revives the Red Ogre Automaton and enables use of its upper body. Upon second use, the Red Ogre Automaton is fully operational.

Drilling Stab: *Melee Weapon Attack:* +3 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 5 (1d6 + 2) piercing damage.

RED OGRE AUTOMATON

Large construct, unaligned

Armor Class 16 (natural armor)

Hit Points 0/40

Speed 25ft

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
16 (+3)	12(+1)	14(+2)	1(-5)	3(-4)	1(-5)

Damage Immunities poison

Condition Immunities charmed, deafened, frightened, poisoned

Senses blindsight 60 ft., passive Perception 6

Languages —

Challenge 1/2 (100 XP)

Battle-damaged: The Red Ogre Automaton was defeated in a previous battle, and begins the fight deactivated in the middle of the floor. Upon being repaired by the Spider Automaton, the Red Ogre Automaton regains use of its upper body, allowing it to crawl at half speed and attack as normal. The second time it is repaired, it also regains use of its legs.

Control Plate: Embedded within the Red Ogre Automaton's head—and faintly visible through gaps in the ogre's synthetic flesh—is a Control Plate, which will open the gate leading into the Workshop if it comes within 10 feet of it. It can be spotted with a DC 13 Investigation check, and removed from the still-functioning Red Ogre Automaton with a DC 15 Sleight of Hand check. Once the ogre is defeated, the Control Plate can be easily removed.

ACTIONS

Garbage Toss: The Red Ogre Automaton grabs a few pieces of debris off the ground, and hurls it in a 15-foot cone. Each creature in that area must make a DC 15 Dexterity saving throw, taking 8 (1d8 + 3) bludgeoning damage on a failed save.

Haymaker: *Unarmed Attack:* +5 to hit, reach 10 ft., one target. *Hit:* 9 (1d10 + 3) bludgeoning damage.

arena. Two of them appear to have been bombed by the same potent magical attack; the other, the Red Ogre, the largest one in the trio, appears to have been cut down by a powerful fighter. Chunks of its synthetic flesh have been torn away, revealing the metallic frame holding it up from within.

"The silence is broken mere seconds after you enter as four automatons power up in unison, their sensor lights flashing on as they acknowledge their new targets. Three humanoid automatons lunge forward without delay, their blade-arms held at the ready. Behind them, a spider-shaped automaton lifts two of its appendages in the air, revealing complex tools at their tips that hum and spin menacingly.

"It would appear your second Test of Initiation has begun."

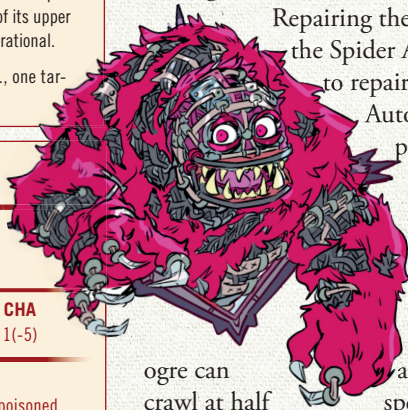
Repairing the ogre on its first turn, the Spider Automaton will attempt to repair the downed Red Ogre Automaton. If left unimpeded by your players, the Red Ogre is healed for 3d8 Hit Points (bouncing back from 0), and regains the use of the top half of its body. In this state, the ogre can attack as normal and crawl at half speed to close distance on your players.

On its second turn, the Spider Automaton will attempt to repair the Red Ogre Automaton again, this time restoring its full mobility, and healing its for another 3d8 Hit Points.

This mechanic constitutes the primary danger in this fight. Keep the pressure on your heroes with the other automatons as the Spider carries out its repairs. After fully restoring the ogre, the Spider's priority changes, and it will simply attack nearby heroes.

Using the Cannon: The cannon used in the Test of Initiation is still operational, but because the room has not been reset following the test conducted earlier in the day, its ammunition is limited. Just one potion of each type remains in the cannon's chamber:

- Healing Potion: Heals a target for 2d4 + 2 Hit



Points.

- **Strength Potion:** Doubles the damage dealt by the target's next attack, either magical or physical.

- **Rage Potion:** Forces the automatons in the room to attack the target during the next round of combat, after which point the potion's effect fades. In order to access the cannon, a hero would need to scale the metal wall from the pit up to the stands surrounding the arena with a DC 13 Athletics check. In order to successfully hit their target with a potion, they must roll a DC 10 Dexterity saving throw.

Exiting the room: In order to leave the arena and continue on into the workshop below, the party will need to find some way of opening the heavy iron gate at the edge of the room. It's extraordinarily heavy—a player who rolls a DC 20 Strength check could lift the gate slightly, enough for the other players to roll beneath it on their turns, but that would leave said hero stranded and vulnerable to the surviving automatons.

In order to raise the gate, the heroes must bring a Control Plate embedded within the Red Ogre's metal skull within 10 feet of the gate—at which point, a signal light embedded in the wall above the gate will illuminate, granting them access to the chamber beyond.

A hero who performs a DC 13 Investigation check on the ogre will spot the Control Plate, housed within its skull, through the exposed holes in its synthetic flesh. With a DC 15 Sleight of Hand check, a player can retrieve the plate from the Ogre if it's still activated—otherwise, the Control Plate can easily be retrieved from its body following the Automatons' defeat.

After defeating the automatons, players will find and discover an Ammo Cache for the cannon containing two Potions of Healing. These potions can heal a player for $2d4 + 2$ Hit Points.

THE MASTERMIND

"A silence falls on your party once again as you pass through the large corridor out of the arena and into the workshop. It's an

enormous space — in fact, it's nearly identical in shape and scale to the chambers where the Test of Initiation is administered. The walls to the left as you enter are lined with tools mounted on tall racks and crates filled to the brim with automaton components, all arranged in an orderly, deliberate manner. The walls to your right, however, are obscured by towering, chaotic piles of half-finished concepts for various animatronic monsters. Two imposing robotic arms ending in pneumatic clamps are hanging lifelessly above, tethered to the ceiling on a grid of rails that crisscross the entire room.

"As you approach the workshop, the quiet is disrupted by a shrill sound emanating from the far side of the workshop. It's the sound of cheerful, melodic whistling.

"The sound is coming from an enclosure at the far side of the workshop, which is separated from the rest of the chamber by a thick lattice grate made of gleaming solid steel, plated with a thick layer of glass. Through the lattice, you see a figure hunched over a control panel lined with multicolored buttons—a dwarven man wearing a thick pair of glasses and an industrial worker's helmet—who regards you with surprise as you step into the room.

"Wow," Carlyle remarks, his voice booming through a loudspeaker mounted above the heavy metal door into his compartment. "Looks like I need to ramp up the difficulty curve on the test a bit, huh?"

Role-playing Carlyle: Carlyle is a Bureau of Balance member, but he's a rare case: He's been left disillusioned by all of the Director's actions since the Bureau's founding, and has decided to eradicate this new global powerhouse before it can grow any further. He's unshakable in his resolve; try as they might, the heroes will be unable to convince him to call off his plan.

There should be something relatable in Carlyle's argument. The

Bureau is remarkably powerful, after all, with its impressive combat capabilities and ability to rewrite memories on a global



DRAGON AUTOMATON

Large construct, unaligned

Armor Class 16 (natural armor)

Hit Points 50

Speed 35ft

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
16 (+3)	13 (+1)	15 (+2)	1 (-5)	3 (-4)	1 (-5)

Damage Immunities poison

Condition Immunities charmed, deafened, frightened, poisoned

Senses blindsight 60 ft., passive Perception 6

Languages —

Challenge 1 (200 XP)

Metallic Frame: The Dragon Automaton is an unfinished creation; it has nothing covering its metallic skeleton and vulnerable components housed within. As a result, it loses functionality continuously as it is damaged. When the Dragon Automaton drops below 35 Hit Points, its armor plating slides off, reducing its AC to 14. When it drops below 20 Hit Points, its Combustion Engine dies out, disabling its breath attack. When it is dropped below 10 Hit Points, its Mobility Systems are destroyed, reducing its speed to 0.

ACTIONS

Fire Breath (Recharge 5–6): The Dragon Automaton exhales fire in a 50-foot cone. Each creature in that area must make a DC 16 Dexterity saving throw, taking 8 (1d8 + 4) fire damage on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one.

Claw: *Melee Weapon Attack:* +6 to hit, reach 10 ft., one target.

Hit: 8 (1d10 + 3) slashing damage.

Bite: *Melee Weapon Attack:* +5 to hit, reach 15 ft., one target. *Hit:* 9

(1d12 + 3) piercing damage.

scale. He's of entirely sound mind, and is simply dealing with this potential international threat in the only way he knows how by utilizing the very automatons the Bureau has commissioned for testing their new recruits.

Not to put too fine a point on it: Carlyle knows an army when he sees one. And this army, with their floating moon base and memory-altering magics, has grown unchecked for too long.

With the headquarters' security team on leave this evening, Carlyle knows his ideal window for completing this operation is closing quickly. Hoping to avoid any further delays, he attacks the heroes with the full capabilities his workshop provides. With a few button presses on his control panel, the pile of half-built automatons against the wall of the room topples, and a gargantuan mechanical dragon emerges from within.

Accessing the Safety Cage: Carlyle has locked himself within a Safety Cage, which is built into the wall of the workshop opposite from where the

CARLYLE

Small humanoid (dwarf), unaligned

Armor Class 14 (natural armor)

Hit Points 12

Speed 30ft

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
14 (+2)	12 (+1)	15 (+2)	10 (+0)	14 (+2)	8 (-1)

Damage Immunities poison

Senses darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 12

Languages Common, Dwarvish

Challenge 1/2 (100 XP)

Tinfoil Helmet: Fearing a psychic assault from the Bureau of Balance, Carlyle has donned a tinfoil-lined safety helmet which grants him immunity from charming effects and psychic attacks. The helmet is not fastened in any visible way, and can be easily removed.

Operator: Carlyle begins the battle inside the Safety Cage, utilizing the Control Panel to attack the party with the Manufacturing Arms. When using the Control Panel, he can attack with both arms during his turn. If a party member makes their way into the Safety Cage, he shifts his attention away from the Control Panel, and will attack the encroaching hero directly.

ACTIONS

Manufacturing Arm Control: Carlyle uses the Control Panel to take control of both Manufacturing Arms with his action (see next page).

Wrench Slam: *Melee Weapon Attack:* +4 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 6 (1d8 + 2) bludgeoning damage.

players just entered.

There are two means of entry into the cage. First is a heavy iron door, which has been padlocked and fused shut from within by Carlyle. A moderate Thieves Tools check will handle the lock, but the fused door requires a bit of strength to pry open. If investigated, the players will realize the fuse job was rushed and can easily be overcome with strength or melted down with fire.

The other is a large window, covered with a metal latticework that is shielded by a thick pane of glass. The glass can be broken, giving players options to attack Carlyle inside — but the metal latticework is extremely sturdy and would take some significant effort to penetrate.

As breaking into the Safety Cage should be the heroes' main objective, Carlyle will fend them off at all costs with the two Manufacturing Arms. The Dragon Automaton will pose immense danger to the heroes, but will mostly serve to keep them from their primary goal of sieging the cage.

Dragon rampage: The Manufacturing Arms are under Carlyle's direct control from within the

MANUFACTURING ARM

Medium construct, unaligned

Armor Class 14 (natural armor)

Hit Points 20

Speed 30ft

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
14 (+2)	10 (+0)	13 (+1)	1 (-5)	3 (-4)	1 (-5)

Damage poison

Condition Immunities charmed, deafened, frightened, poisoned

Senses —

Languages —

Challenge 1/4 (50 XP)

Remote Controlled: The Manufacturing Arms hang from the ceiling, and are controlled by Carlyle from within the Safety Cage. They will be instantly disabled if Carlyle is defeated or otherwise forced away from the control panel. Do not roll Initiative for the Manufacturing Arms — they'll simply be maneuvered by Carlyle during his turn.

Electronic Bouncers: The main priority of the Manufacturing Arms (and, by extension, Carlyle) is to protect the door leading into the Safety Cage. They will target any creature who attempts to enter the cage through any means.

ACTIONS

Reposition: The Manufacturing Arm attempts to clamp onto a creature and lift them into the air. The targeted creature must make a DC 13 Dexterity saving throw; on a failed save, the creature is Grappled by the arm, and lifted 10 feet above the ground. If freed from its grasp while suspended in the air, the creature must make a DC 13 Dexterity saving throw, or take 1d6 Bludgeoning damage and land prone as they fall to the ground.

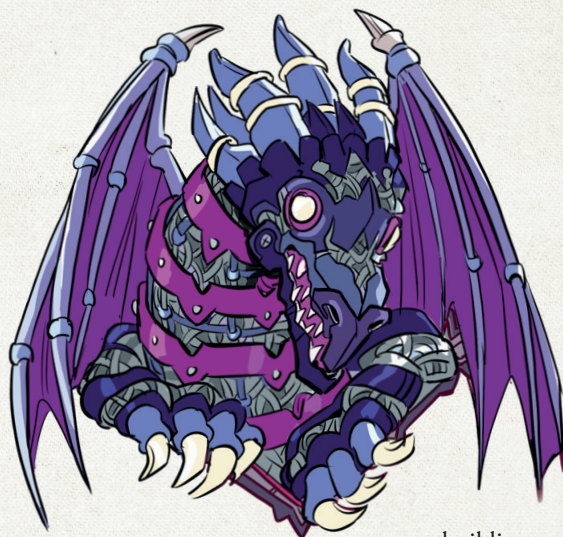
Pound: *Melee Weapon Attack:* +3 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target.

cage—but the Dragon seems to be operating on some sort of automated protocol, choosing a target from one of the heroes and attacking without restraint. The heroes can pick up on this behavior and use the Dragon's lack of judgment to turn its attacks against the Safety Cage.

Upon defeating Carlyle, any surviving automata drop to the floor, deactivated. The threat has been contained.

CONCLUSION

“As you return to the surface from the arena beneath the Training Dome to report your success to the Director, you see the sunrise crest the edge of the moon base. Near the Hangar Bay, you see a squadron of recently returned security personnel—all wearing T-shirts acquired during their



team-building retreat at Camp Goodfriend—receiving a stern talking-to from Captain Lyssa. You leave them to their unenviable morning, and enter the gathering hall, where the Director is waiting for your debriefing.

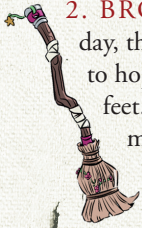
“I see,” the Director says, unsettled. She takes a sip of a cup of coffee, one which you assume has supplanted her slumber throughout the night. “We’ve had members of the Bureau turn against us before, but never out of discontentment over how we carry out our mission. I fear this sentiment could be widely held throughout our membership.”

“The Director sighs, and walks to a window overlooking the waking world below. ‘I suppose that’s my problem to sort out. You’ve all done enough work tonight—exemplary work, all around. I owe you all a debt beyond measure; for now, please accept this as a symbol of my gratitude.’”

For completing the mission, each player receives a payment of 250 gold pieces—and, as a bonus for going above and beyond the call of duty, the Director also grants each party member one additional token for the Fantasy Gachapon. If your players wish to continue their heroes’ adventure in a new campaign, they’ll have one more magic item to bring with them as a souvenir.

ITEMS

1. RING OF FROST: This wondrous ring makes any beverage the wearer holds instantly frosty, vastly improving most beverages while effectively ruining most teas and coffees. Oh, also, it grants the wearer resistance to Frost damage.



2. BROOM OF FLYING: Once per day, this mysterious broom allows its owner to hop aboard and fly at a speed of 60 feet. It can only remain in the air for five minutes, at which point its magic fades and any airborne passengers crash to the ground spectacularly.

3. AWARENESS FRAMES: This slick pair of thick-framed glasses grants the wearer +1 to all Perception and Investigation checks.

4. MALADY'S UNFORTUNATE FEDORA: Once per day, this unstylish hat allows its wearer to turn completely invisible — however, the hat itself remains completely visible, floating in the air atop the wearer's head. The effect lasts for five minutes or until the hat is removed.



5. RING OF THE GIANT SLAYER: This potent ring grants the wearer +1 to physical attack and damage rolls against enemies of the size large or higher.

6. PHANTOM FIST: This imposing gauntlet grants the user +1 to Unarmed attack and damage rolls. On a successful attack, the target must succeed on a DEX DC 13 save, or be knocked back 2d4 feet.

7. THE GLUTTON'S FORK: Once per day, this unsettling fork will allow the user to eat any non-magical item they can fit in their mouth and regain 2d6 Hit Points. Just tap the fork on the item and it will become edible.



8. POCKET SPA: This impossible tent contains a full, luxurious spa for the owner and their party to take advantage of during a short rest. While relaxing inside, visitors will gain an additional 3 Hit Points for each Hit Dice or healing items used during their rest.

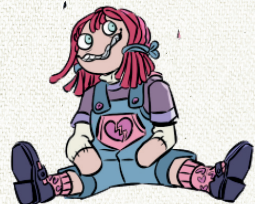


9. ALL-OR-NOTHING COIN: Once per day, the owner of this ornately-etched coin can substitute a regular 2-sided coin flip in place of a D20 roll. If the coin lands on heads, it is considered a Critical Hit. If the coin lands on tails, it is considered a Critical Failure.

10. THE IMMOVABLE ROD: This unassuming metal bar can be activated with the press of a button on its hilt, allowing it to freeze in place — even in mid-air — and become immovable. In this state, the rod can sustain a tremendous amount of weight before falling, and can only be moved by deactivating its button, or with a DC 30 Strength check.

11. HAUNTED DOLL: This eerie doll contains a powerful spirit within, who forms a bond with the owner of its vessel. If the owner of this doll should fall to 0 HP or below from any source of damage, the doll takes the hit instead, and shatters into pieces.

12. TARANTULA'S BRACELET: Once per day, this webbed accessory bestows upon its wearer the effects of the spell Spider Climb, allowing them to maneuver along walls and ceilings at their walking speed for 10 minutes. While the wearer is climbing, they also have advantage on Stealth checks.



13. THE FAILURE CAPE:

This preposterous garment allows its wearer to inspire their companions to action with their own disastrous maneuvers.

While in combat, should the wearer fail a roll during their action, the next player to act will gain +1 on their next action requiring a D20 roll.



14. RING OF THE GRAMMARIAN:

Once per day, the wearer of this humble ring can alter one letter on a spell's title to manipulate the spell being cast into having a different effect. For example, the spell Cause Fear could become Cause Bear. The effect of these altered spells are determined by the DM, but with the caster's intentions taken into account.

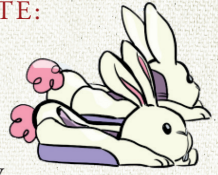
15. SHRIEKING PENDANT: This horrible necklace emits a shrill cry whenever its wearer is endangered by an enemy. Upon taking melee damage from an enemy attack, the pendant produces a haunting scream, forcing the next enemy to take disadvantage on their next attack.

16. THE TIME BELT: Once per encounter, this futuristic-looking belt allows its wearer to change the flow of battle in their favor. After taking damage from an enemy attack, the wearer may elect to act next, moving their position in the Initiative Order for the remainder of the fight.

17. COUNTERWEIGHT BELL: This ever-chiming bell is designed to increase the lethality of weapons to which it is affixed, at the cost of said weapon's accuracy. When tied to a melee weapon's hilt, that weapon deals an additional 2 points of damage on a successful attack—but bestows a -1 penalty to attack rolls, on account of the weapon's balance being thrown off.

18. SLIPPIES OF HASTE:

This comfortable pair of slippers grants their wearer advantage on Initiative rolls and +10 feet of movement speed. They also, surprisingly, provide a considerable amount of arch support.



19. CHAOTIC EMERALD: Once per day, this precious gemstone can be activated by its owner, casting the battlefield in a faint green light that reveals the future to their party. When the emerald is used, every player at the table must roll a D20. On their next turn, the player must use that die result to determine the failure or success of their action.

20. BONUS CAPSULE: This capsule was added to the machine by Leon as a special prize for those lucky enough to find it. It simply contains two additional Fantasy Gachapon tokens, which can be spent immediately to use the machine twice more.



THE ADVENTURE ZONE

HERE THERE BE GERBLINS

Carey Fangbattle

Rogue 2 Purveyor of Sweet Flips Dragonborn Chaotic Good

LEVEL

BACKGROUND

RACE

ALIGNMENT

EXPERIENCE POINTS

12 PASSIVE WISDOM (PERCEPTION)

12 PROFICIENCY BONUS

13

ARMOR CLASS

+3

INITIATIVE

30 ft.

SPEED

STRENGTH

+1

12

DEXTERITY

+3

16

CONSTITUTION

+1

12

INTELLIGENCE

+0

10

WISDOM

+0

10

CHARISMA

+2

14



- +1 Strength
- +5 Dexterity
- +1 Constitution
- +2 Intelligence
- +0 Wisdom
- +2 Charisma

SAVING THROWS

- +7 Acrobatics (Dex)
- +0 Animal Handling (Wis)
- +0 Arcana (Int)
- +1 Athletics (Str)
- +4 Deception (Cha)
- +0 History (Int)
- +0 Insight (Wis)
- +2 Intimidation (Cha)
- +0 Investigation (Int)
- +0 Medicine (Wis)
- +0 Nature (Int)
- +2 Perception (Wis)
- +2 Performance (Cha)
- +4 Persuasion (Cha)
- +0 Religion (Int)
- +5 Sleight of Hand (Dex)
- +7 Stealth (Dex)
- +0 Survival (Wis)

SKILLS

Hit Point Maximum 15

CURRENT HIT POINTS

TEMPORARY HIT POINTS

Total 2d8

HIT DICE

Success

Failures

DEATH SAVES

NAME	ATK BONUS	DAMAGE/TYPE
Rapier	+5	1d8+3 Piercing
Dagger	+5	1d4+3 Piercing
Dagger (Thrown)	+3	1d4+3 Piercing

Dragon Breath (DEX DC 11): 2d6 Lightning, half on save (5 by 30 ft. Line)

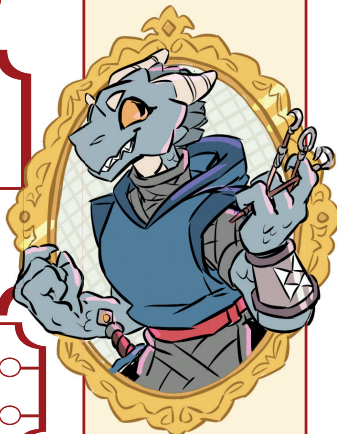
ATTACKS & SPELLCASTING

Languages: Common, Draconic
 Proficiencies: Acrobatics, Crossbow, Sleight of Hand, Deception, Dexterity Saving Throws, Dice Set, Forgery Kit, Intelligence Saving Throws, Light Armor, Longsword, Perception, Persuasion, Rapier, Shortsword, Simple Weapons, Sleight of Hand, Stealth, Thieves' Tools

OTHER PROFICIENCIES & LANGUAGES

- CP 0 Leather
- SP 0 2 Daggers
- EP 0 Rapier
- GP 0 Crowbar
- GP 15 Thieves' Tools
- PP 0

EQUIPMENT



Sneak Attack (1d6)
 Thieves' Cant
 Cunning Action

Racial Traits:

Draconic Ancestry:
 Blue Dragon Breath
 Weapon (1 per Rest)
 Damage Resistance

FEATURES & TRAITS

THE ADVENTURE ZONE

HERE THERE BE GERBLINS

Johann

Bard 2 Inspiring Violinist Half-Elf True Neutral

LEVEL BACKGROUND RACE ALIGNMENT EXPERIENCE POINTS

14 PASSIVE WISDOM (PERCEPTION)

+2 PROFICIENCY BONUS

13

ARMOR CLASS

+3

INITIATIVE

30 ft.

SPEED

STRENGTH

-1

8

DEXTERITY

+2

15

CONSTITUTION

+0

10

INTELLIGENCE

+1

12

WISDOM

+2

14

CHARISMA

+3

17

- 1 Strength
 - +4 Dexterity
 - +0 Constitution
 - +1 Intelligence
 - +2 Wisdom
 - +5 Charisma
- SAVING THROWS

Hit Point Maximum 14

CURRENT HIT POINTS

TEMPORARY HIT POINTS

Total 2d8

HIT DICE

Success

Failures

DEATH SAVES

- +4 Acrobatics (Dex)
 - +3 Animal Handling (Wis)
 - +2 Arcana (Int)
 - +0 Athletics (Str)
 - +5 Deception (Cha)
 - +2 History (Int)
 - +4 Insight (Wis)
 - +4 Intimidation (Cha)
 - +2 Investigation (Int)
 - +3 Medicine (Wis)
 - +2 Nature (Int)
 - +4 Perception (Wis)
 - +5 Performance (Cha)
 - +5 Persuasion (Cha)
 - +2 Religion (Int)
 - +3 Sleight of Hand (Dex)
 - +4 Stealth (Dex)
 - +3 Survival (Wis)
- SKILLS

NAME	ATK BONUS	DAMAGE/TYPE
Dagger	+5	1d4+2 Piercing
Shortbow	+4	1d6+2 Piercing

Spell Attack Bonus	+5
Spell Attack DC	=13
Spellcasting Ability	Cha

ATTACKS & SPELLCASTING

Languages: Giant, Common, Elvish
 Proficiencies: Acrobatics, Charisma
 Saving Throws, Crossbow, Sleight of Hand, Deception, Dexterity Saving Throws, Disguise Kit, Dulcimer, Insight, Light Armor, Longsword, Lute, Lyre, Perception, Performance, Persuasion, Rapier, Shortsword, Simple Weapons, Stealth, Viol

OTHER PROFICIENCIES & LANGUAGES

CP	0	Leather Armor
SP	0	Dagger, Shortbow
EP	0	Backpack, Clothes, Costume (2)
RP	0	Rations (1 day)(5)
GP	15	Waterskin
PP	0	Disguise Kit
	0	Lyre
	0	Violin

EQUIPMENT



Bardic Inspiration (D6)
 Jack of All Trades
 Song of Rest

Racial Traits:
 Darkevision
 Fey Ancestry

Cantrips
 Message
 Vicious Mockery
 1st Level Spells; 3 Slots
 Dissonant Whispers
 Healing Word
 Tasha's Hideous Laughter
 Charm Person
 Silent Image

FEATURES & TRAITS

THE ADVENTURE ZONE

HERE THERE BE GERBLINS



Killian

Fighter 2 The Absolute Baddest Orc Neutral Good

LEVEL BACKGROUND RACE ALIGNMENT EXPERIENCE POINTS

13 PASSIVE WISDOM (PERCEPTION)

+2 PROFICIENCY BONUS

16
ARMOR CLASS

+2
INITIATIVE

30 ft.
SPEED



STRENGTH

+2

14

DEXTERITY

+2

15

CONSTITUTION

+2

15

INTELLIGENCE

+0

10

WISDOM

+1

12

CHARISMA

+0

10



- +4 Strength
 - +0 Dexterity
 - +4 Constitution
 - +0 Intelligence
 - +1 Wisdom
 - +0 Charisma
- SAVING THROWS

Hit Point Maximum 20

CURRENT HIT POINTS

TEMPORARY HIT POINTS

- +4 Acrobatics (Dex)
 - +1 Animal Handling (Wis)
 - +0 Arcana (Int)
 - +4 Athletics (Str)
 - +0 Deception (Cha)
 - +0 History (Int)
 - +1 Insight (Wis)
 - +2 Intimidation (Cha)
 - +0 Investigation (Int)
 - +1 Medicine (Wis)
 - +0 Nature (Int)
 - +3 Perception (Wis)
 - +0 Performance (Cha)
 - +0 Persuasion (Cha)
 - +0 Religion (Int)
 - +2 Sleight of Hand (Dex)
 - +2 Stealth (Dex)
 - +3 Survival (Wis)
- SKILLS

Total 2d10

HIT DICE

Success

Failures

DEATH SAVES

NAME	ATK BONUS	DAMAGE/TYPE
Crossbow, Heavy	+6	1d10+2 Piercing
Handaxe	+4	1d6+2 Slashing

ATTACKS & SPELLCASTING

Fighting Style:
Archery
Second Wind
Action Surge

Racial Traits:
Darkvision
Menacing
Relentless Endurance
 Savage Attacks

Languages: Common, Orc, Draconic
Proficiencies: Acrobatics, Athletics, Constitution, Saving Throws, Drum, Heavy Armor, Intimidation, Light Armor, Martial Weapons, Medium Armor, Perception, Shields, Simple Weapons, Strength, Saving Throws, Survival

OTHER PROFICIENCIES & LANGUAGES

- CP 0 Chain Mail
- SP 0 2 Handaxes
- SP 0 Crossbow, Heavy
- SP 0 Backpack
- EP 0 Hunting Trap
- EP 0 Rope, Hempen (50 feet)
- GP 10 Tinderbox
- PP 0 Torch (10)
- PP 0 Waterskin

EQUIPMENT

FEATURES & TRAITS

THE ADVENTURE ZONE

HERE THERE BE GERBLINS

Magnus Burnsides

Fighter 2 Folk Hero (To Some) Human

Lawful Good

LEVEL

BACKGROUND

RACE

ALIGNMENT

EXPERIENCE POINTS

10 PASSIVE WISDOM (PERCEPTION)

+2 PROFICIENCY BONUS

15

ARMOR CLASS

+2

INITIATIVE

30 ft.

SPEED

STRENGTH

3

16

DEXTERITY

2

14

CONSTITUTION

2

15

INTELLIGENCE

-1

9

WISDOM

0

11

CHARISMA

1

13

- +4 Strength
- +0 Dexterity
- +4 Constitution
- +0 Intelligence
- +1 Wisdom
- +0 Charisma

SAVING THROWS

- +4 Acrobatics (Dex)
- +1 Animal Handling (Wis)
- +0 Arcana (Int)
- +4 Athletics (Str)
- +0 Deception (Cha)
- +0 History (Int)
- +1 Insight (Wis)
- +2 Intimidation (Cha)
- +0 Investigation (Int)
- +1 Medicine (Wis)
- +0 Nature (Int)
- +3 Perception (Wis)
- +0 Performance (Cha)
- +0 Persuasion (Cha)
- +0 Religion (Int)
- +2 Sleight of Hand (Dex)
- +2 Stealth (Dex)
- +3 Survival (Wis)

SKILLS

Hit Point Maximum 22

CURRENT HIT POINTS

TEMPORARY HIT POINTS

Total 1d10

HIT DICE

Success

Failures

DEATH SAVES

NAME ATK BONUS DAMAGE/TYPE

Railsplitter +5 1d10 + 3 Slashing 1d6 + 2

Handaxe +5 1d6 + 3 Slashing (20/60)

ATTACKS & SPELLCASTING

Languages: Dwarvish, Common,
Proficiencies: Acrobatics, Animal Handling, Athletics, Carpenter's Tools, Constitution Saving Throws, Heavy Armor, Light Armor, Martial Weapons, Medium Armor, Shields, Simple Weapons, Strength Saving Throws, Survival, Vehicles (Land),

OTHER PROFICIENCIES & LANGUAGES

- CP
- SP
- EP
- GP 10
- PP
- Railsplitter
- Shield
- Chain Mail
- 2 Handaxes
- Backpack
- Crowbar
- Hammer
- Piton (10)
- Rope, Hempen
- (50 feet), Tinderbox
- Torch (10)
- Waterskin
- Woodcarver's Tools

EQUIPMENT

Fighting Style:
Protection
Second Wind
Action Surge

FEATURES & TRAITS



THE ADVENTURE ZONE

HERE THERE BE GERBLINS

Merle Highchurch

Cleric 2

Child of Pan

Beach Dwarf

Neutral Good

LEVEL

BACKGROUND

RACE

ALIGNMENT

EXPERIENCE POINTS

13 PASSIVE WISDOM (PERCEPTION)

+2 PROFICIENCY BONUS

14

ARMOR CLASS

-1

INITIATIVE

25 ft.

SPEED

STRENGTH

+1

13

DEXTERITY

-1

8

CONSTITUTION

+3

16

INTELLIGENCE

+1

12

WISDOM

+3

16

CHARISMA

+0

10

- +1 Strength
- 1 Dexterity
- +3 Constitution
- +1 Intelligence
- +5 Wisdom
- +2 Charisma

SAVING THROWS

- 1 Acrobatics (Dex)
- +3 Animal Handling (Wis)
- +1 Arcana (Int)
- +1 Athletics (Str)
- +0 Deception (Cha)
- +1 History (Int)
- +5 Insight (Wis)
- +0 Intimidation (Cha)
- +1 Investigation (Int)
- +5 Medicine (Wis)
- +3 Nature (Int)
- +3 Perception (Wis)
- +3 Performance (Cha)
- +0 Persuasion (Cha)
- +3 Religion (Int)
- 1 Sleight of Hand (Dex)
- 1 Stealth (Dex)
- +5 Survival (Wis)

SKILLS

Hit Point Maximum 19

CURRENT HIT POINTS

TEMPORARY HIT POINTS

Total 1d8

HIT DICE

Success

Failures

DEATH SAVES

NAME ATK BONUS DAMAGE/TYPE

Warhammer +3 1d8 + 1 Bludgeoning

Club +3 1d6 + 1 Bludgeoning

Spell Attack Bonus +5

Spell Attack DC =13

Spellcasting Ability Wis

ATTACKS & SPELLCASTING

Languages: Common, Dwarvish, Halfling, Goblin, Proficiencies: Battleaxe, Brewer's Supplies, Charisma Saving Throws, Handaxe, Heavy Armor, Insight, Light Armor, Light Hammer, Medicine, Medium Armor, Nature, Religion, Shields, Simple Weapons, Survival, Warhammer, Wisdom Saving Throws

OTHER PROFICIENCIES & LANGUAGES

- CP 0 Shield
- SP 0 Chain Mail
- SP 0 Club
- EP 0 Warhammer
- GP 0 Backpack
- GP 1.5 Tinderbox
- PP 0 Extreme Teen Bible

EQUIPMENT



Divine Domain:

Nature
Acolyte of Nature

Racial Traits:

Darkvision
Dwarven Resilience
Tool Proficiency
Stonecunning
Dwarven Toughness

Cantrips

Sacred Flame
Shillelagh
Spare the Dying

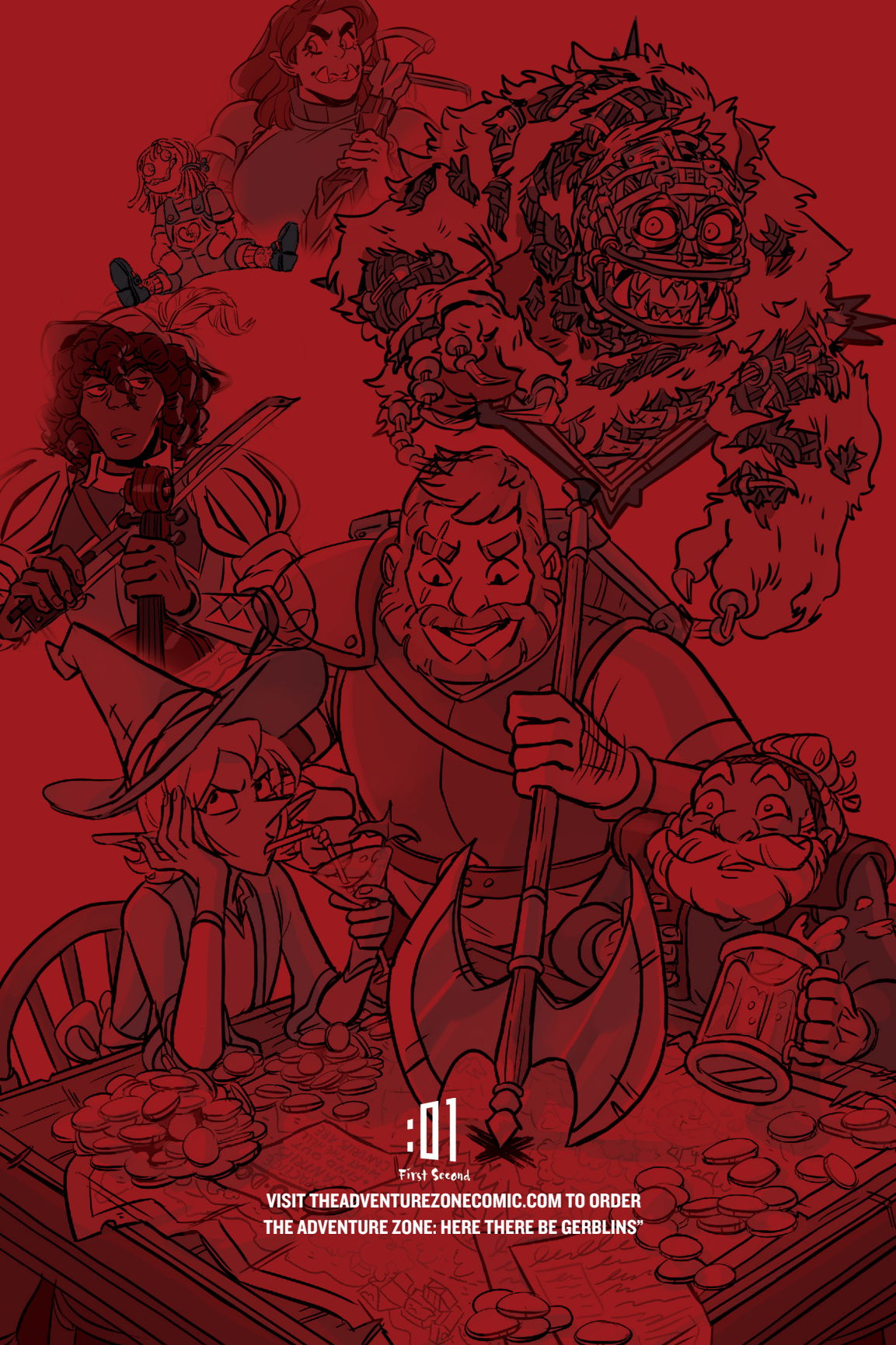
1st Level Spells; 2 slots

Animal Friendship
Cure Wounds
Healing Word
Shield of Faith

2nd Level Spells; 1 slot

Zone of Truth

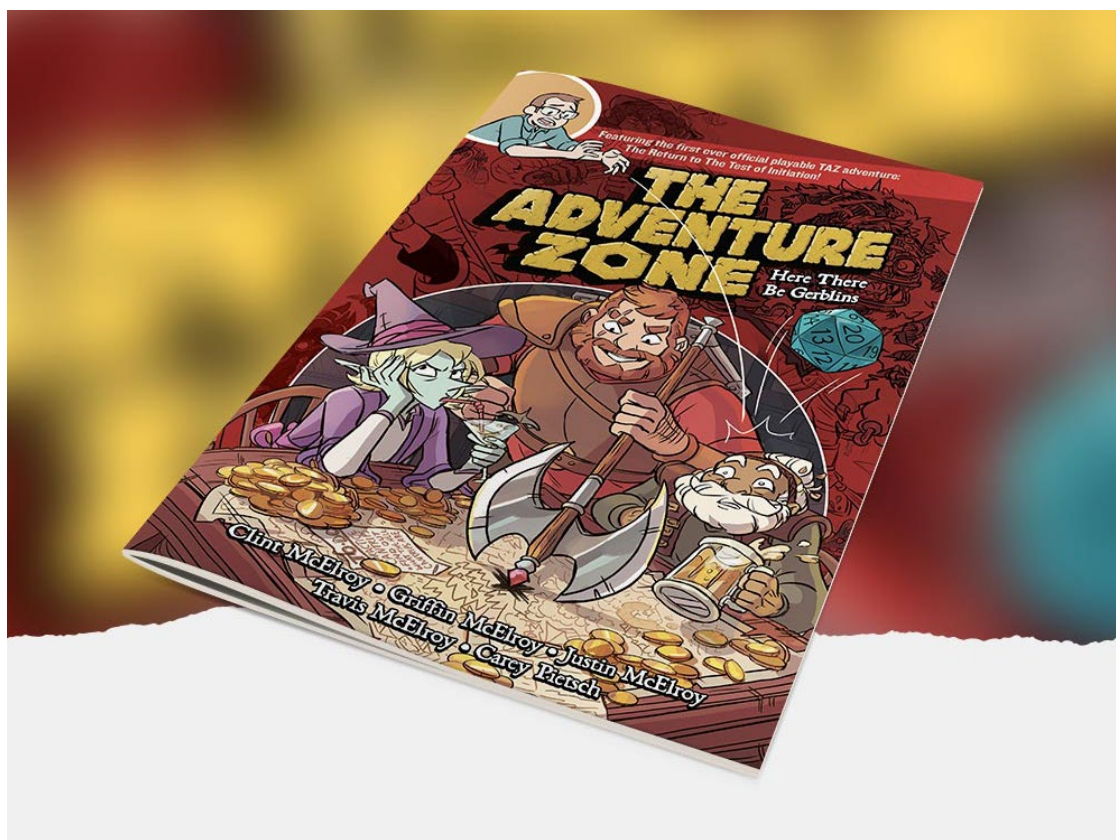
FEATURES & TRAITS



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First Second

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THE ADVENTURE ZONE: HERE THERE BE GERBLINS™



Comic: D&D Toons

Jason Thompson returns, with an inside look at *Mordenkainen's yugoloths!*

Comic artist, author and illustrator Jason Thompson currently runs a Monday night gaming group in San Francisco. His works include the Eisner-nominated Manga: The Complete Guide, King of RPGs, H.P. Lovecraft's The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath, and the tabletop game Mangaka: The Fast & Furious Game of Drawing Comics. His favorite things to draw are landscapes, plants, reptiles and amphibians.



(Select to view)

[HIGH RES LINK](#)

Neither demon nor devil, a yugoloth's only conflicting drives are between evil and more evil. Though used as cheap labor by mages who know their True Names, they invariably find loopholes in their contracts, and act with selfish abandon knowing they will respawn in Gehenna upon 'death'.



Dinoloths

Incarnations of Disease

To ancient peoples, the difference between diseases, daemons and preexisting conditions was often unclear, leading to incidents like the Siege of Folarg in 258 D.R., in which a goat with carpal tunnel syndrome was thrown over the castle walls to infect the defenders. Among the most powerful of yugoloths, oinoloths are the cause of this ancient myth, each one embodying a particular illness.

Anthraxus **Poxus** **Peanut Allergy** **Hand, Foot and Mouth Disease**

1 lost souls Come with me

2

3

4

5

6 HELL We have arrived safely oh great... yay...

Dagnoloths

Asymmetrical Mid-Level Daemons

Dhergoloths, canoloths and mezzoloths are unintelligent, the majority having easily guessable True Names such as 'password' or '1234567'. Above them are the lopsided yagnoloths, cunning and even refined fiends whom most adventurers nonetheless avoid due to misunderstandings about their grotesque form.

YAGNOLOTH AGE 13

YAGNOLOTH AGE 12

"When a show of force is necessary, it shifts its cape to reveal its brutally powerful giant appendage..."

ewww gross dont make eye contact

Merrenoloths

Navigators of the River Styx

Also known as Charonodaemons, Merrenoloths are the least vicious of yugoloths, living only for the toxic Styx-spray on their faces, and the burble of hydroloths devouring their prey. Blasphemous, forbidden ferry schedules show how to summon them to pilot skiffs, junks, dinghies, coracles, galleys, knarrs and even undead dragon turtles. Information is gladly given but safety requires avoiding unnecessary conversation.

(Select to view)

[HIGH RES LINK](#)

Dungeons & Doodles
Our latest Dungeons & Doodles episode has now aired! This time, Stan!, *Magic: the Gathering's* Matt Cavotta, and special guest star Dani Hartel joined this *Dragon+* livestream. The questions we asked them to draw?

1. **MORDENKAINEN'S REJECTS:** The archmage Mordenkainen was very discerning when picking creatures to go into his *Tome of Foes*, and he doesn't suffer fools gladly. Can you draw a completely unworthy creature that ol' Mordie would just laugh out of contention?
2. **BLACKSMITH FASHION WEEK:** Armorers and master smiths are always experimenting with new raw materials in order to create ever more effective armor. But not every experiment produces winning results...
3. **MONSTER MAKE-OVER:** There have been a lot of cool monsters invented for D&D over the years, but let's face it... there have been some pretty ridiculous ones, too. Let's see if you can give a make-over to one and turn it into something cool (or at least less cringe-worthy).
4. **HARD TO FIND HAGS:** Hags are one of the most adaptable monsters in D&D. Whatever terrain or location adventurers go to, there always seem to be a particular type of hag adapted just to that environment. Of course, that means there must be some pretty niche hags out there!

And, their finished pieces—enjoy!

[DOWNLOAD PDF](#)



[BACK TO TOP](#)

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Oinoloths

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Anthraxus

Poxus

Peanut Allergy

Hand, Foot and Mouth Disease

Yagnoloths Asymmetrical Mid-Level Daemons

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"When a show of force is necessary, it shifts its cape to reveal its brutally powerful giant appendage..."

ewww gross don't make eye contact



Merrenoloths

Navigators of the River Styx

Also known as Charonodaemons, Merrenoloths are the least vicious of yugoloths, living only for the toxic Styx-spray on their faces, the sound of souls crashing against the rocks, and the burble of hydroloths devouring their prey. Blasphemous, forbidden ferry schedules show how to summon them to pilot skiffs, junks, dinghies, coracles, galleys, knarrs and even undead dragon turtles. Information is gladly given but safety requires avoiding unnecessary conversation.

Dungeons

+

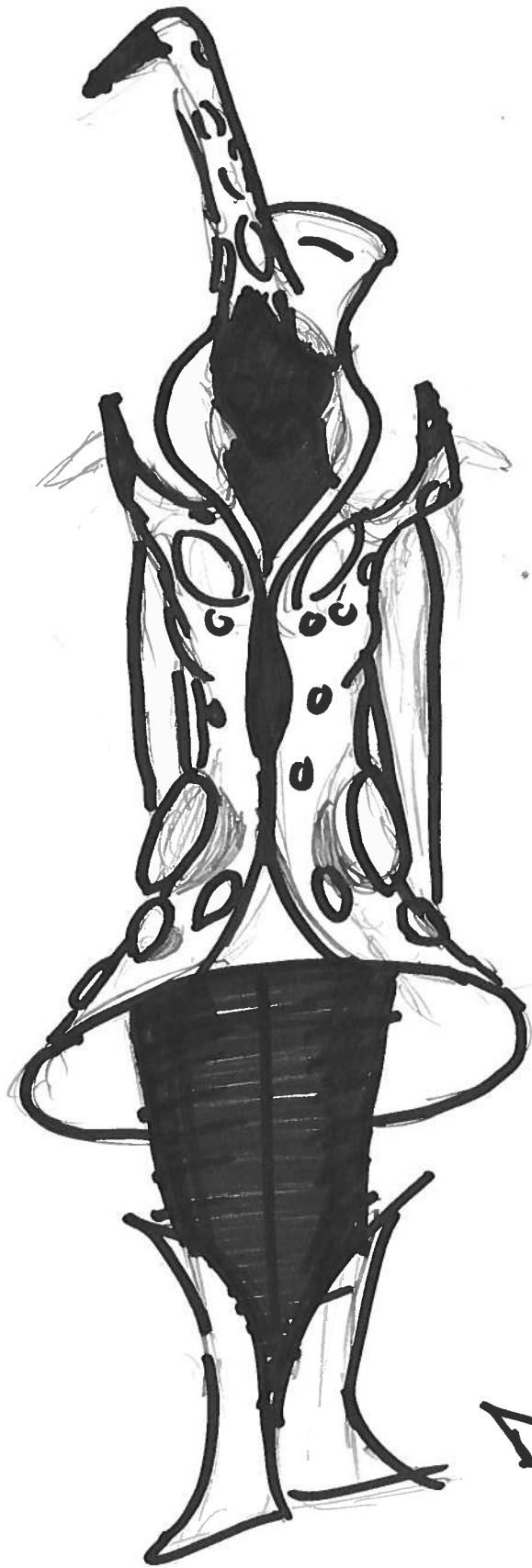
Doodles





Dani

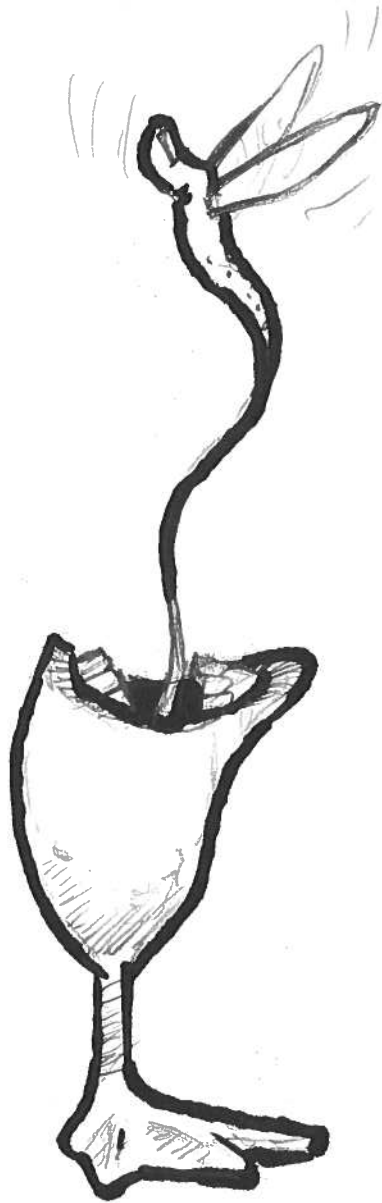




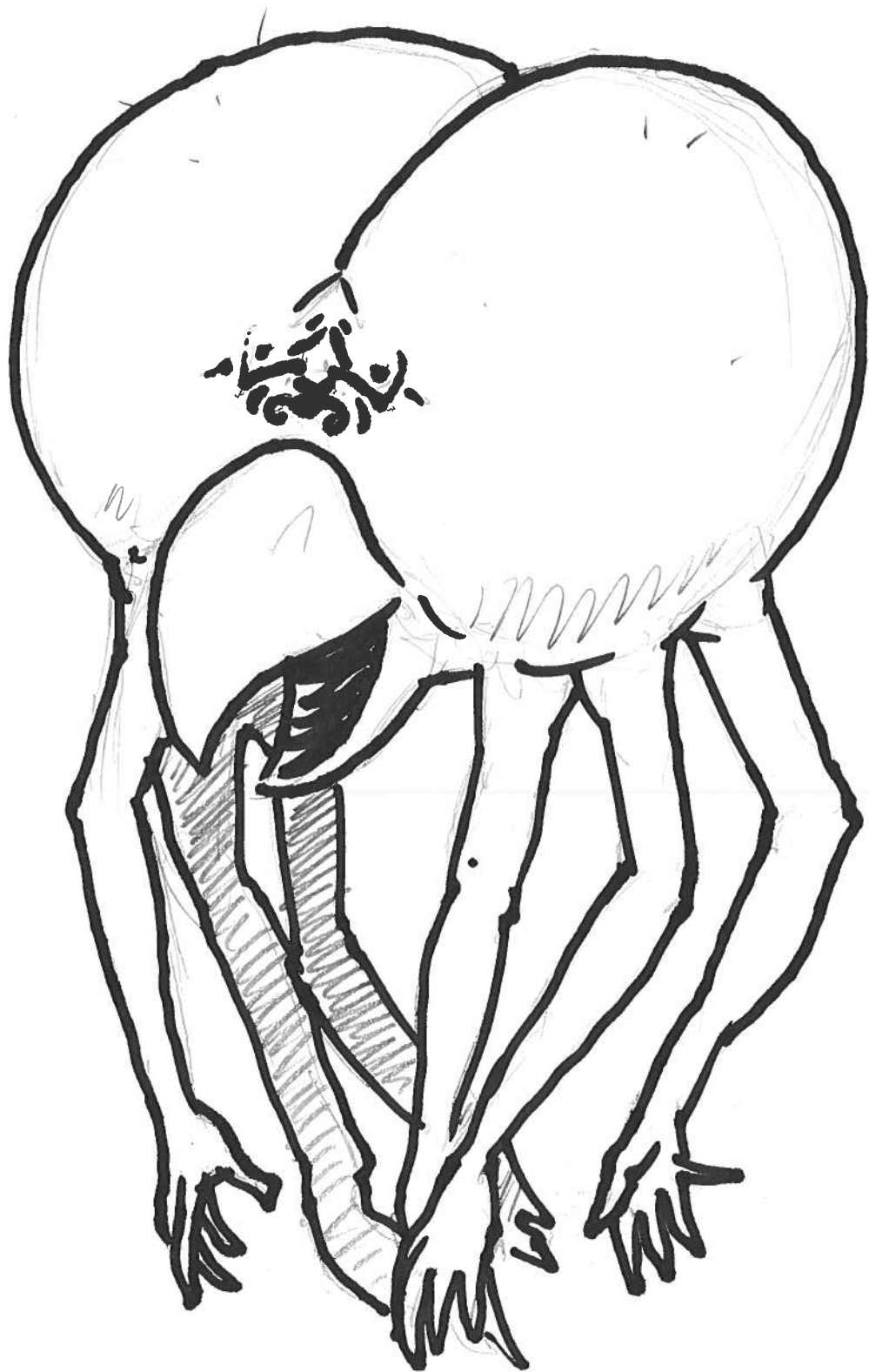
Dani



Dani









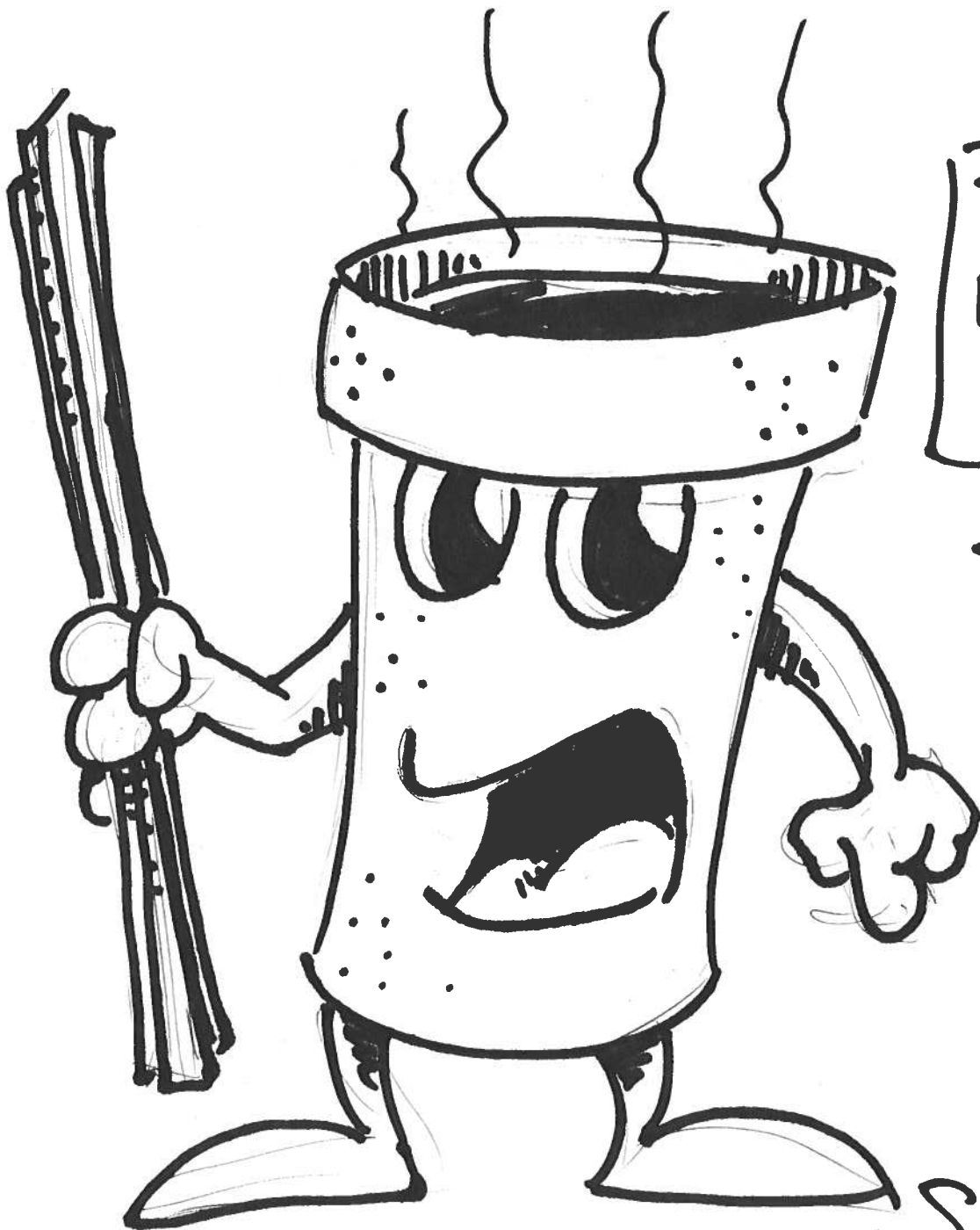
POPCICLE STICK ARMOR

...THEY'RE
ALL USED...



Stan!

STYROFOAM GOLEM



DANGER!
HOT
CONTENTS!

Stan!

VEGE PYGMIES



Stan!

NOW SERVING
003

GET
BENT
BERK
DIOT



Stan!

Streaming Highlights

This issue our livestream DMs peek into their crystal balls to reveal where their weekly games head following the Stream of Many Eyes.



TRAPPED IN THE BIRDCAGE

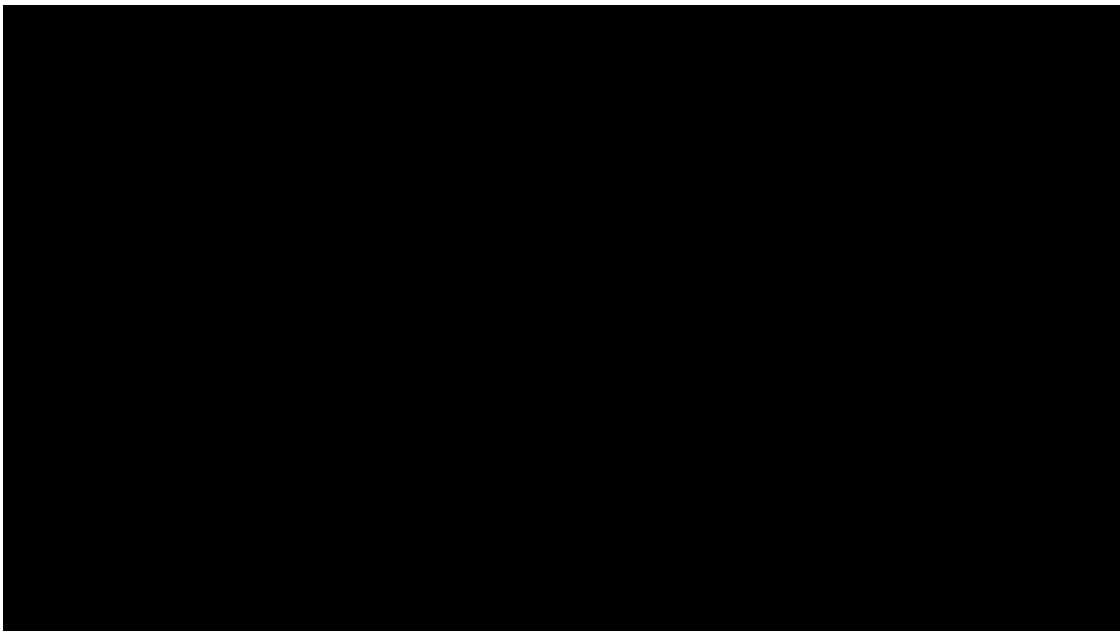
“Next season our heroes will absolutely find out that they’re trapped in Sigil, but it’s up to them if they want to help their new friends or find their way home. They’ll also be taking a few planar jaunts and tying into *Dice, Camera, Action!* by helping young Strix!” says DM Holly Conrad.

Trapped in the Birdcage streams on [the official D&D Twitch channel](#) from 5-7pm Pacific Standard Time on Thursdays.

DICE! CAMERA! ACTION!

“After the SoME, the Wafflecrew will find itself embroiled in wacky Waterdeep hijinks. Unlike previous seasons, which were very dire and also very plot-driven, this season will allow the heroes more breathing room to pursue their own interests and find their place in the world. That’s not to say there won’t be conflicts, but this season will feature multiple antagonists rather than a singular threat,” says DM Chris Perkins.

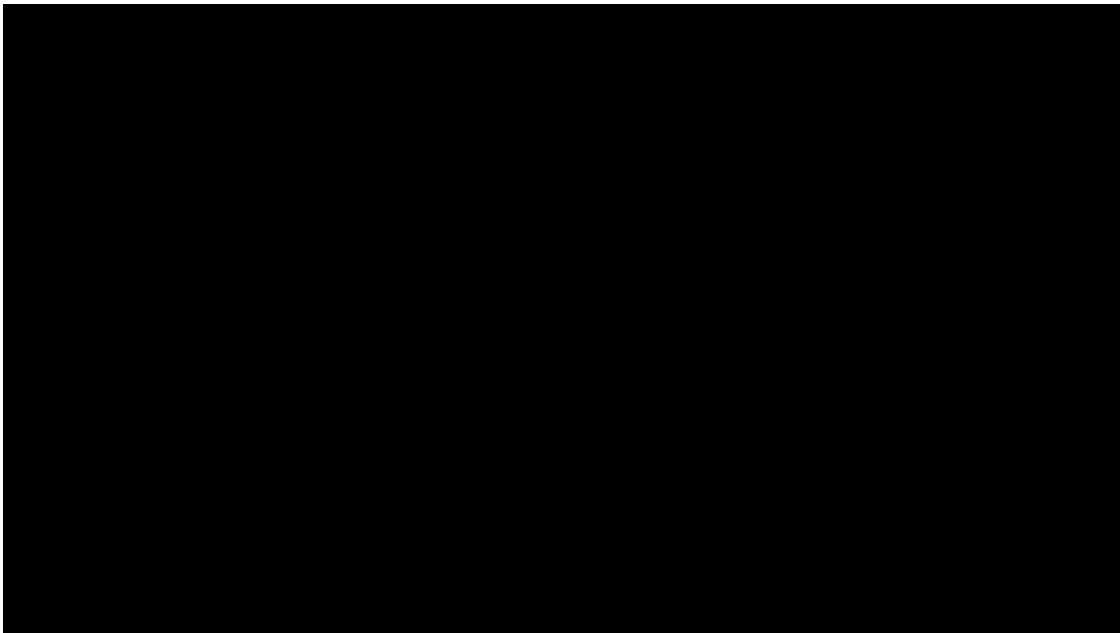
“I’m also planning to tie up a bunch of loose ends this season. For example, in an episode titled *When Chickens Come Home to Roost*, Diath will have to deal with the fallout of releasing Maegera the Dawn Titan from an *iron flask* back in season two. In terms of guest stars, we’ll see some new faces this season as well as the return of a couple of familiar faces—including, I think, some surprising ones.”



Dice, Camera, Action! streams on [the official D&D Twitch channel](#) from 4pm Pacific Standard Time on Tuesdays. Read more about the game on [the official wiki](#).

DARK AND DICEY

“Viewers can look forward to our anti-heroes setting the groundwork for their own morally grey organization right under the nose of the law,” says DM Kaiji Tang. “After all, what fun is there in being bad guys without any minions to push around?”



You can [learn more about the new show here](#) and watch on Mondays at 7pm PST on [the official D&D Twitch channel](#).

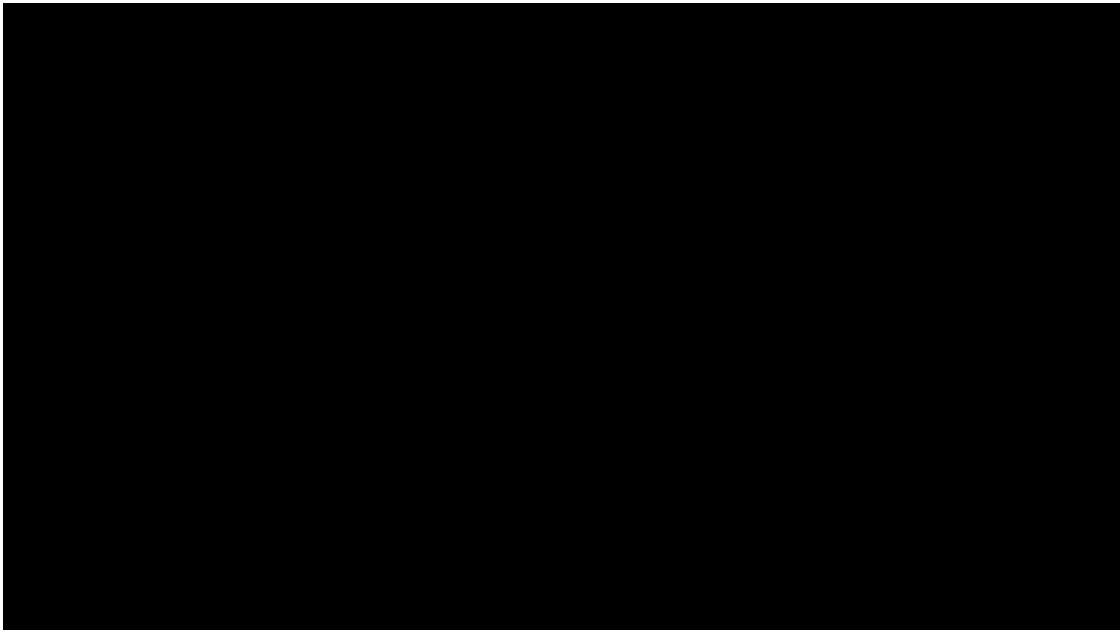
GIRLS GUTS GLORY

“Our adventures take us on the path of most resistance—after having lost a close friend of the party and Dranishka’s lover to Valindra’s wrath. What lengths will they go to in the hopes of bringing him back?” asks DM Kelly Lynne D’Angelo. “The landscape is harsh. The path is muddied. And the answer is anyone’s game.”

Girls Guts Glory streams on [the official D&D Twitch channel](#) from 3pm Pacific Standard Time on Sundays.

MAZE ARCANA

“Now that our sirens have finally made it to Waterdeep they must make a name for themselves while facing the fallout of the destruction of the Lamia’s beauty pyramid scheme,” says DM Satine Phoenix, who promises “more performances and the return of old friends.”



Maze Arcana streams from 7pm Pacific Standard Time on Tuesdays and Wednesdays on [the official D&D Twitch channel](#).

BACK TO TOP



Fiction: Secrets of the Deep

In this issue's fiction, where the dead go to rest, never again to be troubled by their knowledge...

By Mark Price and David Roomes

ON BURIED TREASURE...

The Stream of Many Eyes has now revealed our own secrets—

namely, that the forthcoming D&D campaign involves a treasure hunt of no small reward. Already at least four villainous agents are masterminding the search, as well as any number of individual parties (very possibly including your own!).

For this issue's fiction, we look at one start to the hunt (with the authors' own thoughts on where it may possibly be hidden)....

SECRETS OF THE DEEP

Braya spat a tooth onto the stone floor and looked up to meet their eyes.

“I've downed brandy that hits harder than that.”

Malick raised an eyebrow at her. He glanced over to the brute, a female half-orc with a vacant stare and arms like scarred tree trunks, still poised from the last strike. She only shrugged.

“More practice then,” he said and gave a nod.

The brute slammed a weighty fist into the side of Braya's head. The young thief listed to the opposite side of her chair, as far as her restraints would allow. She shook her head to stay alert.

No fear. Stay locked in.

She focused on her surroundings: the cold stone around them, the salty tang of seafoam in the air, the rhythmic drip of water echoing from somewhere off in the dark tunnel behind her. A heavy circular door set into the wall, beyond which she could hear the distant crash of waves. And of course, her three assailants: Malick, the half-orc brute, and behind them both, a cloaked figure, watching in silence.

In the reflection off the puddle at her feet, she saw Malick peer around the chamber. They were at the bottom of a tall tower hugging the side of a coastal cliff. Against the curved wall was the stone staircase. And her friend. Lifeless.

“Why did you bring him here?” Malick asked coldly.

Braya looked around the dank, cobbled chamber.

“Obviously... the view.”

The half-orc grabbed her hair and yanked Braya’s head backward. Malick stepped closer and leaned in, putting his face close to hers. His thin face was framed in grey whiskers, the stench of cheap wine on his breath.

“We’ve tracked you since morning. Watched you closely. And now you bring his body to this crumbling tower, swaddle him in seaweed fronds, and for what? Some quaint ceremony for the dead?”

Braya’s eyes glanced over at Tyben’s body on the iron platform in the center of the room—still attached by frayed rope to the top of the tower. She’d struggled to lower it by the rusted pulley anchored far above, fearing all the while the rope would snap and send him tumbling. A master at stealth in life, he would not have appreciated such an undignified fall, especially at her hand.

The seaweed she had so painstakingly wrapped him in glistened wetly in the flickering torchlight. She had cried through most of it, right up until they caught her.

Tyben, her mentor. Her friend. The slender calloused hands, which she had seen work locks so deftly, now folded upon his chest. The calm grey eyes that never missed a detail, closed and unmoving.

Her eyes came back to face her interrogator, as he continued:

“Word spreads fast. I know he was hiding something. And you’re going to tell me—”

“Is this going to take long?” interrupted Braya. “I’m dining with the Open Lord tonight and can’t decide what to wear.”

Malick’s fist lashed out in anger, striking her across the jaw.

Braya’s chair pitched over from the blow, and she fell heavily on her side. The half-orc burst out laughing, which seemed to fade as Braya’s vision blurred. Darkness closed in on her.



She had been in this position before, she realized, lying on her side

with a bruised cheek against cold, wet stone. Just last year, a training session in the outer city. Tyben had been standing over her with that look on his face, a mix of disappointment and patience. She'd evaded his lunge successfully, but then slipped on a bucket and fell hard against the jagged stonework.

"And that," Tyben said, sheathing his sword, "is why we're always aware of our surroundings, yes?"

Rain-slicked tombstones surrounded them in the shadow of an old hillside church. The brooding sky above them lent no cheer to the exercise.

"Everything's wet and slippery," declared Braya, as she stood up and brushed herself off. "Why do we always train here?"

"It's a good obstacle course. In the rain, even better."

"It's a graveyard." Braya looked around her. "And you always say you'll be buried at sea."

"That's true."

"Why do you even worship a sea god? You're a thief."

Tyben motioned down the hill and past the Dock Ward, beyond the old harbor and out to the slate blue Sea of Swords, whose waters carried a blustery northern chill.

"Tell me," he said, "When you look out across the ocean, what do you see?"

She gave a shrug.

"Nothing," she said.

"We're our most dangerous when we start from nothing."

Before Braya could respond, the old man refocused on the ancient graveyard.

"And your greatest treasure..." Tyben said, gesturing with open arms, "is *everything*. Everything around you. In the middle of a heist, a fight, a bluff. The tiny detail you see and your opponent doesn't..."

that's the key to survival.”

“...and to secret, untold riches?” she interjected.

Tyben smiled slightly.

“Every good thief has a hoard of secrets. Some are made for sharing, but the big ones... well, they're best locked safely away. And you're right, I worship a sea god. One day I'll go to the sea. Where the dead rest, never again to be troubled by their knowledge. When that day comes, you'll help me.”

Braya glanced down at the bucket that tripped her. Half its bottom was missing, weeds having long grown through.

“Never again to be troubled by buckets either, aye?” Tyben added.

She gave the bucket a harsh kick, sending it sailing through the air.

“Aye. No more broken buckets.”



Braya opened her eyes and the world was sideways. She was still lying on the chill, wet floor. Her three interrogators were waiting.

The half-orc brute was leaning casually against the far wall, peeling a shiny red apple with a small, almost dainty knife.

The cloaked one had finally removed her hood to reveal an elven woman of dark hair streaked with thatches of white. Strange painted symbols adorned her skin, and tiny bones were woven into her braids. A warlock of some sort? She huddled over Tyben's body, in close examination of his burial wrappings.

Malick, with growing impatience, paced about the room. He slowed his gait noticing Braya was awake.

“From the dead, she rises,” he sneered. “Or, she would if she could...”

Straightening his surcoat with a tug, he continued:

“I thought we could deal with this rationally,” he said, the tiniest a

hint of sarcasm in his voice. “But since you’d rather make clever remarks than cooperate, we’ll have to resort to other means.”

He gave a nod to the warlock, who reached into the folds of her robes and withdrew a silver pendant with a glittering crystal at its center. She ran a finger across it to brush off some lint, and carefully placed it on Tyben’s chest.

“Never go hungry while others have bread, never go thirsty while others have wine,” Malick taunted. “Our friend Tyben kept his spoils to himself for far too long...”

The warlock began to concentrate on the pendant. A dim glow flickered deep within its crystal and then suddenly flared to life.

“I have him,” the warlock said.

The purple glow strengthened, illuminating the dim chamber. Tied to her fallen chair, Braya’s eyes were locked on the spectacle, helpless to escape but unable to look away.

“Ask your questions. Do it quickly,” said the warlock.

Malick stepped eagerly forward. “Tell us about the treasure.”

The elf closed her eyes. Tyben’s corpse twitched suddenly, as if recoiling from an open flame. She placed her hands on the body, holding it fast, and leaned closer, tilting her head, as if listening to some faint sound.

Finally, she spoke—her words a sibilant whisper, translating from the spirit realm.

“A cache of gold... so large it can... scarcely be counted.”

“Yes, yes,” said Malick. “But where?”

“An ancient vault...” Tyben’s rival drew closer to his body, which again agitated under the warlock’s touch.

“...of dwarven make...” Fear gripped Braya. What *did* Tyben know? Is *this* what cost him his life?

“*Where?*” Malick demanded.

The light in the crystal began to flicker. The warlock leaned heavily on the corpse, fidgeting with the pendant, struggling to maintain control.

“His spirit is strong... it’s difficult...”

Malick scoffed at this. “You want to get paid or not?”

“He’s... *fighting* me, he’s...” her voice wavered.

“*Fight back!*” barked Malick.

The warlock pushed the pendant hard against the corpse’s flesh and the light in the crystal flared brightly. The fronds began to curl and turn brown, and soon Braya caught the faint smell of smoldering flesh.

The burning, rotten stench in her nostrils brought Braya a surge of adrenaline. “Bastards!” she yelled, struggling angrily against the ropes that bound her. But the ropes, uncaring, held her fast.

“It’s... underneath the city...”

“*More! Tell me more!*” Malick screamed at the corpse. “*Or the girl joins you in death!*”

A sick feeling churned in the pit of Braya’s stomach. She had failed him. Only the half-orc stood unmoved, calmly peeling her apple.

Suddenly, a puzzled look came across the warlock’s face. She squinted slightly, as if receiving a new message—one she didn’t understand.

“Something, something about... a bucket... a broken bucket...”

The hairs instantly rose on the back of Braya’s neck.

“And what the hell’s *that* supposed to mean?” Malick asked.

Tyben’s lesson. Braya’s mind raced furiously. *Start from nothing.* Her eyes darted around the room, mentally checking off everything she could. *The tower, the chamber, the chair, the pulley, the rope...*

“...the knife...” she said out loud, her nerves narrowing into sharp focus, gaining strength by the second, eyes fixing on the brute.

The brute looked up from her apple, questioning.

“That sweet, adorable little fruit knife,” she continued.

“What of it?” Malick turned to her.

Braya smiled calmly. She understood now. She had everything she needed.

“That’s the knife I’m going to kill you with,” she stated evenly.

Malick laughed with contempt. “I’m afraid you’ll find that difficult, tied to a chair.”

“Yes, and here you went to all this work. So much preparation, just for tonight...”

Braya noticed the purple glow from the pendant faded slightly as the exchange began to distract the warlock’s attention. She pressed forward with her taunt of Malick.

“You know, I think Tyben told me about you. A laughable toad with dreams of being a gang leader,” she continued. “And the most feeble swordsman he’d ever seen...”

The rival’s derisive smirk darkened to a frown. His hand moved to his scabbard.

“Shut your mouth, snipe, or I’ll slit your throat...”

“Word on the street is you’re far more likely to slit your own.”

The glow had almost completely faded from the chamber. Malick looked up to see his subordinates with their questioning eyes and attention now fixed upon him. After the briefest halting moment, he snapped back at them.

“What are you looking at? Back to your witchcraft, elf! Lose him and you’ll regret it!”

The warlock returned her attention to Tyben’s body. The pendant’s

glow wavered, but then resurged.

Malick glanced at Tyben's body, then to the brute and her knife, and finally back to Braya with a sneer. "You want the old man to know what I can *do* with a sword? Let's see how his resolve holds when I've scattered your limbs across the room." He motioned to the half-orc. "Untie her!"

The brute took a half-step forward, hesitating. They had tied Braya to a chair for reasons beyond torture. But his boss' temper was also legendary, and he'd seen what happened to those who disobeyed.

He drew a curved blade. "*Do it!*"

Relenting, the half-orc dutifully plodded over to undo Braya's bonds.

"Ask again why I brought his body here," Braya called to the warlock, who returned to her trance.

The brute roughly pulled Braya's chair upright, then took the fruit knife and sliced through her restraints in a single, effortless motion. The knife was small, yes. But it was sharp.

"Now. Give her the knife," Malick said.

The brute shrugged and handed it to Braya. She took it gingerly as she stood, stretching stiff muscles. The purple glow again filled the room.

As if from great depths, the warlock's voice came low and raspy.

"A lighthouse this tower was, but more, much more..." she said.

"...more useless drivel..." Malick squared against the young thief, scimitar in hand.

"Unknown to most..." the warlock continued, "...remembered by few... as a tomb to... Umberlee... his final rest..."

"Just make sure he knows what I'm about to do to his apprentice..." he announced, holding his arms wide like an arena challenge.

"Now go ahead, little one," he mocked. "Kill us all."

She flipped the tiny knife in her hand and caught it with a confident smirk.

“Don’t mind if I do.”

She dropped into a combative pose, with the knife held threateningly. Malick flashed a wicked grin and prepared to strike. The half-orc instinctively flanked her and got ready to charge.

The warlock looked up from the corpse with sudden urgency, eyes wide with alarm. The pendant fell to the floor. “Stop her right now!” she called out.

The charge came. Braya dropped her ruse and rolled to the side, narrowly evading them both. She came to her feet and unexpectedly jumped up on the iron platform, straddling Tyben’s body. To Malick’s surprise, she then leapt up and grabbed hold of the lift rope.

“STOP HER!”

With a swift stroke, she cut the fraying, aged rope—the end of which shot upward, taking Braya with it. She looked down at the gaping mouths of the three as she was pulled up, rapidly ascending past the stone staircase, past the surface entrance, and up to the top of the tower.

The iron counterweight reached its limit and jerked violently, crashing against a section of stairs and sending jagged stone fragments tumbling downward. A piece of rock struck the warlock and knocked her to the floor, unmoving, as the rest of the group scrambled to dodge the falling debris.

Braya found herself swinging at the end of the rope at the top of the tower, some fifty feet above the chamber below. She swung her body and dropped lightly to the stone ledge.

Malick shouted up at her. “Think you can outrun my reach? I found you once, I’ll find you again! And trust me... you’ll pay for the delay!”

Looking down to the bottom of the tower, she rested her hand on a rusted lever jutting out from the wall.

“Where the dead go to rest...” whispered Braya, looking sadly at Tyben, still lying serenely on his platform. “...never again to be troubled by their knowledge.”

“I have the pendant! I have your *friend!*” Malick screamed. “*You have nothing!*”

The young thief locked eyes with her rival, unflinching.

“Damn right.”

Braya gave the lever a hard yank.

From deep in the tower came the rapid metallic clacks of a huge gear, and the protesting squeal of rusted iron. The circular door peeled away to reveal moonlight over the sea from their rocky perch hundreds of feet above.

Malick’s rage faded to sudden fear as the roar of thundering water was heard from the opposite tunnel. For indeed, this was not just a lighthouse, nor a tomb, but also a burial chamber. One fit for a sea god. He quickly bolted past the brute and began to race up the stairs.

Too late. A wall of water exploded from the dark tunnel, instantly submerging the bottom of the chamber. Tyben and his platform, the warlock and her pendant, the flailing brute and her apple—all of them vanished in a churning maelstrom of muddy water which quickly swept up the stairs, overtaking Malick and dragging him into the spinning vortex, screaming helplessly.

Within seconds, water had swept through the room and burst out of the circular portal. Everything caught in its deluge shot out over the retreating tide far below, and into a swift, deep oblivion, as the chamber completed its burial duties.

The gears rotated again, and the door slid slowly back to its original position as the rush of water ebbed to a stream, then a trickle, and finally leaving only puddles.

Braya stood in the upper chamber, heart still pounding, uneasy with the sudden tranquility. She took a moment in that stillness, calming her breath. A few steps to her right was a ladder, leading to where a powerful light once burned, warning sailors of dangerous shoals

surrounding the harbor. Long since abandoned. She climbed the ladder to the top of the tower, breathed deep the salt air, and looked north along the coast.

She was instantly rewarded with a sweeping view of the harbor, and the entire city of Waterdeep, all laid out before her. Glittering lights from the Castle Ward shone against the night sky like a promise.

Somewhere, underneath all that... she mused. A secret best locked safely away? Or one to risk death for?

Looking past the graceful outlines of the walking statues, past the cooking fires of the lower city, and past the ship-dotted port, Braya cast her gaze outward to the Sea of Swords, where Tyben had at last found peace.

She peered into the blackness, and there was little doubt what he'd make of it. Beyond the reflected moonlight, there was really nothing to see. Nothing at all.

A good place to start.

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Next Issue: Dragon+ 21

Join our stream of consciousness in the next exciting edition of *Dragon+*!



It's all about new beginnings in Dragon+ Issue 21, as we welcome anyone looking to take up D&D and show them the best way to kick start their adventures.

Naturally, that includes a big focus on kid-friendly roleplaying, as we present content suitable for a younger audience, with advice for Dungeon Masters on how to make the game accessible. We also chat with *Despicable Me 3* and *Minions* director Kyle Balda, with an extra special nod to his amazing yellow friends.

It's not all about the kids, though, and we also speak with seventy-year-old DM Ruth Robertson. Ruth has almost fifty years' playing experience and has been a DM for three decades, and now runs the *Crone's Crucible* livestream.

Crucible
Curse of Strahd
~Tonight~
"All Will Be Well"

While awaiting the Burning Sun Festival, the Dawnwatch Adventurers learned Viktorr is a vampire... and a Strahd minion is to blame! Next, a visit to Blinsky's most bizarre toy shop resulted in the purchase of a Strahd ventriloquist dummy and the shocking discovery that Izek Strazni has been ordering Gadof Blinsky to make dolls that look exactly like Ireena! Why?!

There's all this, plus we continue our exclusive in-depth look at

Waterdeep: Dragon Heist, take another delve into the imposing *Dragon* archive, and serve up all our regulars like maps of the month, a selection of the best D&D video and audio highlights, and much more!

DON'T FORGET YOUR DAILY D&D DELIVERIES

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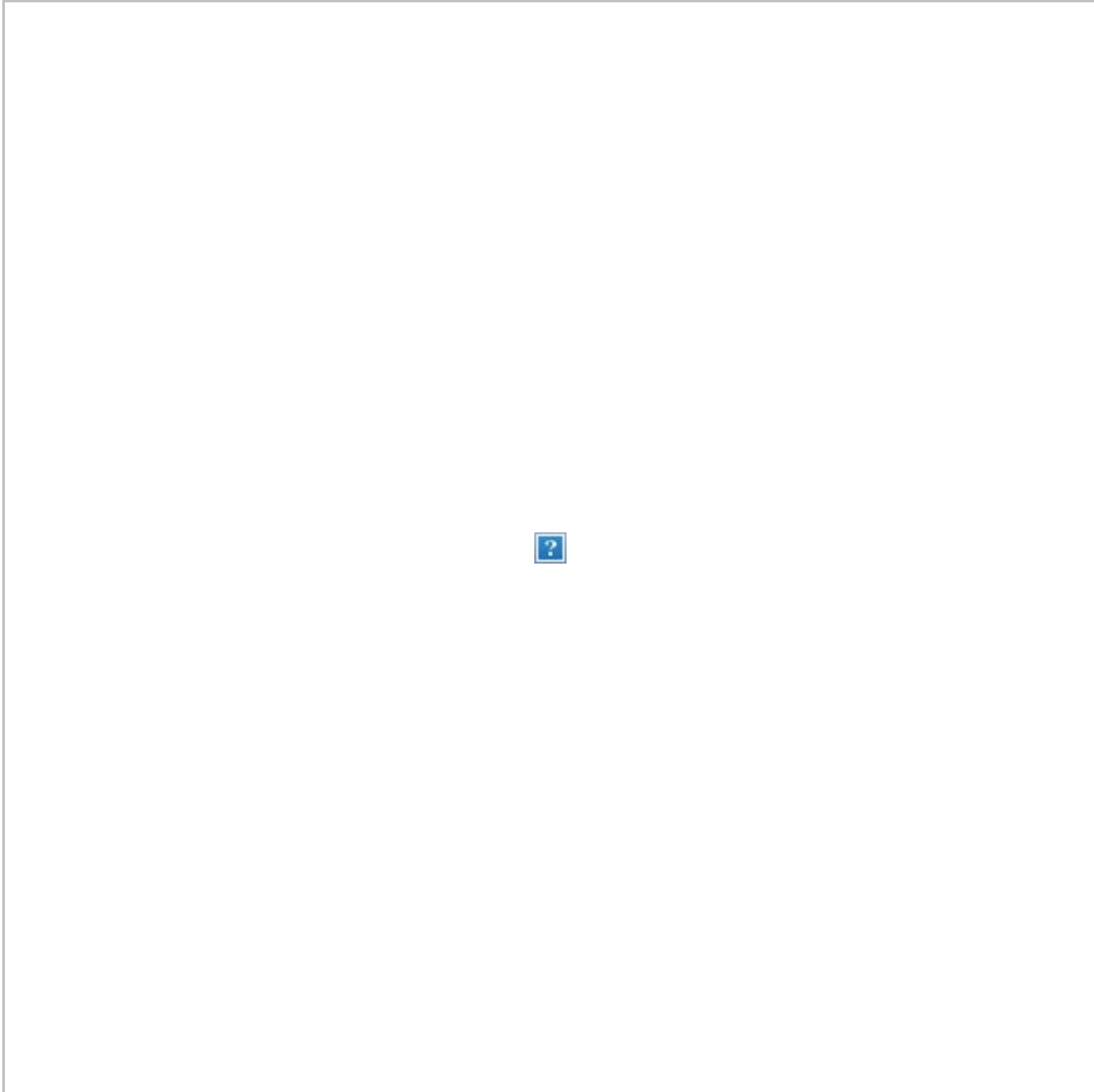
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